192 PAGES

ISAAC ASIMOV'S

APRIL 1986
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SCIENCE · FICTION · MAGAZINE

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R&R

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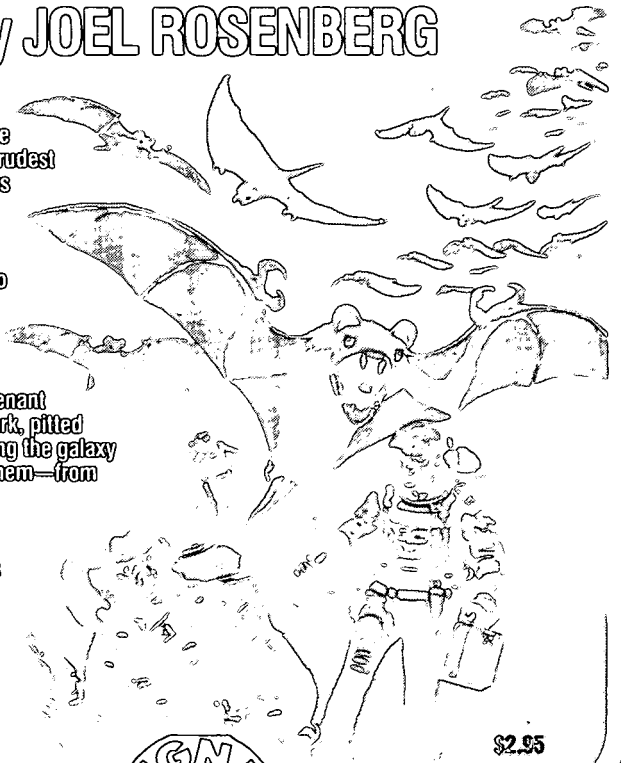

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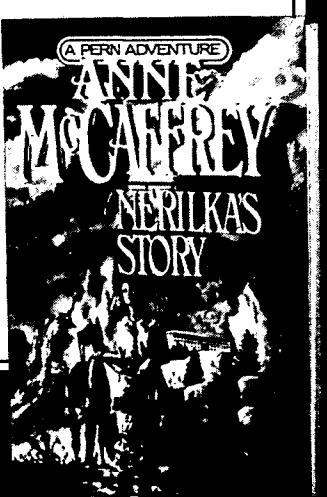

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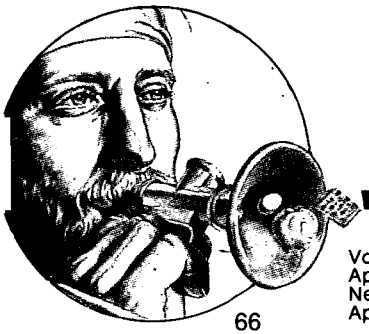

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EDITORIAL

ORIGINALITY

Having published an editorial on "Plagiarism" in the August, 1985 issue of the magazine, it occurs to me to look at the other side of the coin. After all, if plagiarism is reprehensible, total originality is just about impossible.

The thing is that there exists an incredible number of books in which an enormous variety of ideas and an even more enormous variety of phrases and ways of putting things have been included. Anyone literate enough to write well has, as a matter of course, read a huge miscellany of printed material and, the human brain being what it is, a great deal of it remains in the memory at least unconsciously, and will be regurgitated onto the manuscript page at odd moments.

In 1927, for instance, John Livingston Lowes (an English professor at Harvard) published a six-hundred-page book entitled *The Road to Xanadu*, in which he traced nearly every phrase in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to various travel books that were available to the poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

I tried reading the book in my youth, but gave up. It could only interest another Coleridge scholar. Besides, I saw no point to it. Granted that the phrases already existed scattered through a dozen books, they existed for everybody. It was only Coleridge who thought of putting them together, with the necessary modifications, to form one of the great poems of the English language. Coleridge might not have been a hundred percent original but he was original *enough* to make the poem a work of genius. You can't overrate the skills involved in selection and arrangement.

It was this that was in my own mind, once, when I was busily working on a book of mine called "Words of Science" back in the days when I was actively teaching at Boston University School of Medicine. The book consisted of 250 one-page essays on various scientific terms, giving derivations, meanings and various historical points of interest. For the purpose I had an unabridged dictionary spread out on my desk, for I couldn't very well make up the derivations, nor could I rely on my memory to present them to me in all correct detail. (My memory is good, but not *that* good.)

A fellow faculty-member hap-

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pened by and looked over my shoulder. He read what I was writing at the moment, stared at the Unabridged and said, "Why, you're just copying the dictionary."

I stopped dead, sighed, closed the dictionary, lifted it with an effort and handed it to my friend. "Here," I said. "The dictionary is yours. Now go write the book."

He shrugged his shoulders and walked away without offering to take the dictionary. He was bright enough to get the point.

There are times, though, when I wonder how well any story of mine would survive what one might call the "Road to Xanadu" test. (There's no point in offending fellow-writers by analyzing *their* originality, so I'll just stick to my own stuff.)

The most original story I ever wrote in my opinion was "Nightfall," which appeared back in 1941. I had not quite reached my twenty-first birthday when I wrote it and I have always been inordinately proud of the plot. "It was a brand-new plot," I said, "and I killed it as I wrote it, for no one else would dare write a variation of it."

To be sure, it was John Campbell who presented me with the Emerson quote that began the story: "If the stars would appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the City of God—" and it was Campbell who sent me home to write the reverse of Emerson's thesis.

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Allowing for that, the development and details of the story were mine—or were they?

In 1973, I was preparing an anthology of my favorite stories of the 1930s (the years, that is, before John Campbell's editorship so that I named the book "Before the Golden Age") and I included, of course, Jack Williamson's "Born of the Sun," which had been published in 1934 and had, at that time, fascinated my fourteen-year-old self. I reread it, naturally, before including it and was horrified.

You see, it dealt in part with a cult whose members were furious at scientists for rationalizing the mystic tenets of the believers. In an exciting scene, the cultists attacked the scientists' citadel at a very crucial moment and the scientists tried to hold them off long enough to get their task done.

I can't deny having read that story. After all, I still remembered it with pleasure forty years later. Yet only six and a half years after reading it, I wrote "Nightfall" which—dealt in part with a cult whose members were furious at scientists for rationalizing the mystic tenets of the believers. In an exciting scene, the cultists attacked the scientists' citadel at a very crucial moment and the scientists tried to hold them off long enough to get their task done.

No, it wasn't plagiarism. For one thing I wrote it entirely differently. However, the scene fit both stories and having been impressed by it in Jack's story, I drew from memory, and used it in my own story automatically—never for one moment considering that I wasn't making it up out of nothing but had earlier read something very like that scene.

I suppose that any thoroughgoing scholar who was willing to spend several years at the task could trace almost every quirk in "Nightfall" to one story or another that appeared in the science fiction magazines in the 1930s. (Yes, I read them all.) Naturally, he could do the same for any other story written by any other author.

Here's something even more curious. In a note dated 27 June 1985, a reader sent me an enclosure—a photocopy of a short article from the October 1937 issue of the magazine *Sky* (now known as *Sky and Telescope*, I believe).

The article is entitled "If the Stars Appeared Only One Night in a Thousand Years." It begins with the Emerson quotation and it is by M. T. Brackbill. The author describes what it might be like if *the* night on which the stars appear were coming. There might be "pro-stellarists" who believe the stars are coming; and "anti-stellarists" who dismiss the whole thing as a fable. And then the night comes and everyone stares entranced at the stars and finally watches them disappear with the dawn, sadly realizing that for a thousand years they will never be seen again.

It's rather touching, and about the only thing Brackbill misses, that I could see, was the certainty that on that particular night there

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was bound to be a heavy night-long overcast in various parts of the world, so that millions of people would invariably be disappointed.

The person who sent me the photocopy accompanied it with this note: "Dear Mr. Asimov— I happened to spot this article. I wonder if it was an inspiration for one of the greatest short stories ever written!"

Just an "inspiration"? If the article and "Nightfall" were carefully studied and compared, how many events and phrases in the story might seem to have been inspired or hinted at in the article. I haven't the heart to do this myself and I hope no one else does.

Unfortunately, neither the name nor address of the person who sent me the article was on the note, and the envelope the whole thing had come in had not been saved. (Please, everyone, if you want an answer, put your name and return address *on your letter* and not just on the envelope. I frequently discard envelopes without glancing at them except to make sure they are addressed to me.)

In any case, I couldn't answer him. So I must use this editorial as the only way of reaching him.

The truth is that I never saw the article; never had a hint that it existed until the day I received the note and enclosure from my unknown correspondent. It had not the slightest iota of direct influence on my story.

But John Campbell presented me with the Emerson quote and the request that I reverse it, only three years after the article had appeared. Had *he* seen it?

I wouldn't be surprised if he had, and if, as soon as he had come across it or had had it drawn to his attention, he copied down the quote and then waited for the first unwary science fiction writer to cross his threshold. (How thankful I am that it was I.)

Were he still alive (he would only be seventy-five today, if he were), I would ask him about it. I am quite sure, though, what his answer would be. It would be, "What difference does it make?"

So there arises the question: "If it is impossible to be completely original, how can you tell permissible influence from plagiarism?"

Well, it depends on the extent and detail of the borrowing. Based on that, it is possible to tell! It may not always be provable in a court of law, but, believe me, it is possible to tell! ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I am a recent subscriber to your fine magazine and have been very pleased with the five issues I have thus far received. I have been extremely pleased with one feature in particular: the art work. Until I received my first issue of *IAsfm*, I was extremely (!!) disappointed in the illustrations that accompany most science fiction literature.

The work Stephen L. Gervais did in the July issue deserves special recognition, particularly the illustration on page 141. That picture's haunting beauty stayed in my mind longer than did Mr. Zelazny's story. I wish to thank you for using such fine artists. However, I must state that I believe the very best illustrations are those that are formed in the reader's mind. Still thanks again, you've a super magazine.

Sincerely,

Howard C. Kirby

After reading your letter I turned back to my own most recent story in IAsfm, *"He Travels the Fastest" and I must say that I liked the illustration of my character Boom-Boom. I also liked the cover with the young lady in front bearing a suspicious resemblance to the (alas) departed Shawna.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor,

Allow me to make the following contribution to the Fantasy vs. Science Fiction controversy.

To change a fantasy story into a science fiction story: 1) Write a prologue explaining that the story is about a Lost Space Colony. Remember that the Original Settlers know all about psionics and bio-engineering. Ship's engines that explode are a good source of mutations. 2) Edit the body of the story, keeping in mind the fact that all wonderful artifacts are leavings of the Original Settlers. Put "We came from elsewhere" myths into all cultures. Voila, a science fiction story!

I do not mean to say that all Lost Colony stories are disguised fantasy. Some are and some are not.

The Pern books by McCaffrey are clearly a candidate for being disguised fantasy. The thing that I find fascinating about those books is that even if they were set in a fantastic universe (Dragons are dragons because they are dragons, Thread falls because the Red Star is evil, discoveries can be made in the workrooms of long dead sorcerers, etc.), they could be considered science fiction. In most of the Pern books, the story is about technological change WITHIN that fantastic universe.

Dr. Asimov has defined science

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fiction as "that branch of literature that deals with human responses to changes in the level of science and technology." It would be a good test of this definition to ask, "If a story, set in the universe of Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, dealt with the invention of the steam engine, would that be science fiction?"

Which brings us to your magazine. Not all of your magazine pleases me. Keep it up! If I liked everything in your magazine, you would go out of business and I just couldn't take that.

Yours,

Michael Erickson

In that well-remembered paragon of fantasy magazines, Unknown, *there were many stories set in very fanciful Universes that operated by different laws of nature. There was Sprague de Camp's "Incomplete Enchanter," for instance. I would not have found it difficult to consider such stories as close enough to science fiction to allow them inside the tent.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

First, I would like to take this opportunity to commend you and the staff of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. You do a great job. Best wishes for success in all future endeavors.

In reference to the story, "World War Last," by Norman Spinrad, August 1985 issue. Spinrad really let his imagination run wild, or simply observed the actions of the world leaders today. Either way, he did a great job writing the story. He is to be commended.

The story was amusing, humorous, entertaining, fantastic, extravagantly fanciful, and hilarious. I enjoyed it.

On a serious note. Since the beginning of recorded history, mankind has been waging war. In modern times, our military orientation has led mankind to two world wars. Due to mankind's military mentality, there is no effective defense against modern methods of mass destruction.

Our president, while striving to safeguard the peace, has fulfilled his traditional duty to place our nation in the most advantageous position to win the next war. It is useless to proceed further along this path:

One cannot prepare for war and expect peace.

The question of all questions: Will there be an end to the arms race and the threat of a nuclear holocaust? Will mankind finally get rid of the threat of a suicidal third world war? Will the world of tomorrow be a world without arms, without soldiers, and without wars? Can this tragedy whose danger persists and is growing, actually be averted?

The answer is a resounding yes! The transition of the world economy to a peaceful state is perfectly feasible. But without halting the arms race it is hard to count on the successful settlement of global problems of population, energy, mineral resources, environmental protection, international terrorism, world hunger and famine, etc. On the other hand, the billions of dollars that are dumped each year by mankind into the bottomless pit of the arms race will be more than

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HORSECLANS #14

A MAN CALLED MILO MORAI

By ROBERT ADAMS

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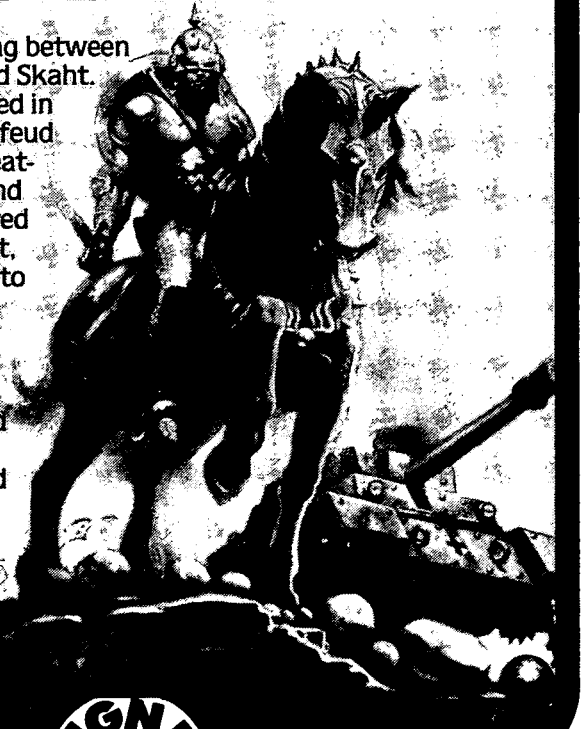

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enough for accomplishing the most daring projects.

H. G. Wells, who many consider the father of future studies, reflecting on the next fifty years, wrote in 1931: "They (referring to world leaders) just fumble along. The bands play and we 'troop the colors.' The party men twaddle about debts and security. They love their countries so that they would rather see them starve than let them cooperate with nasty foreigners. They do their best to reassure the world that this skimped, anxious, dangerous life we lead is the best that can be done for us. These rulers and leaders and statesmen of ours get in front of the cameras at every possible opportunity to put their fatuous selves on record, while Death, the Ultimate Creditor, and Collapse, the Final Stabilizer, add up their inexorable accounts."

How ironic the similarities between the reflections of H. G. Wells in 1931, the actions of our current world leaders, and the characters in Norman Spinrad's story, "World War Last."

Ronald L. Cain
Perry, GA

Amen! It distresses me that so many people think that a peaceful world goes against "human nature." Yet these same people are horrified by crime and are always disappointed that we can't somehow put an end to it. War is merely crime magnified enormously. If you want an end to crime and somehow expect it, you should a million times over want an end to war and somehow expect that.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Thank you for printing the letter from fifteen-year-old Jon White in the August issue. As a public librarian I applaud his parents' policy to allow him to read whatever he wished, thus teaching him to distinguish between the good and the bad.

In the same column Abigal Strichartz said "So maybe if we can learn how to use all of what we have, and *to raise each child in the most enriching environment . . .*" Jon seems to be an example of what happens when a child is so reared.

We tried to give our children that kind of environment, and it was my youngest, college-age son who got me really involved with science fiction (cons and the whole bit!) So it can be said (at least in our case) that SF helped to bridge the generation gap.

Incidentally, my hobby is collecting stories by authors who write both mysteries and science fiction. Guess who holds a place of honor in my collection!

Congratulations that two of the Nebula stories came from *IAsfm.* Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

Nancy Ann Rodich
Technical Services Librarian

We're delighted to have received your letter. The importance of reading remains primary even in our day of cassettes and television. Nothing is as accessible as a book; nothing as flexible; nothing serves as well for study or for exercising the imagination. And, of course, a magazine is only a periodically-appearing, paper-bound book.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Isaac,

I received my first issue of my *IAsfm* subscription a short time ago, and am nearly finished with the second. These are the August and September issues.

In the August issue, quite easily my favorite story was Kate Wilhelm's "The Gorgon Field." This is a well-realized story! I've been deeply interested in the more mysterious aspects of the western states ever since visiting there some time ago. I have since found the Castaneda books an inexhaustible source of fascination.

But this story is not just a conglomeration of mystical speculation, it's also a mystery story, a whodunit made considerably harder to solve by the intervention of time. AND it's a story of familial conflict, the power-struggle of generations that echoes the story's theme of old orders that passeth away and the new order's desecrations. I'm also glad that this is in an SF magazine; usually such stories are considered pure fantasy (by the SF fans *I* know, anyway), and I wouldn't, though I *love* fantasy and want to see this story considered as such.

After all, the whole mystical realm, or rather what we've labeled as such, is something we have inklings of and don't really understand yet. But, strange as it sounds to say, we ARE getting closer to understanding what's involved the more we find out through modern physics. I've gotten off the track here, though. All else I can say is, bravo for Wilhelm! She's done an extraordinary, thought-provoking job here, and amen to that.

"Logic Is Logic" 's main character, the narrator George, was such a snob—a high-handed prig! And he was interesting *because* he was a snobbish, high-handed prig. I've never read an "Azazel" story before (I'm assuming there have been others from the tone of the story itself), but it was refreshing. It made me think that that would have been the kind of story Arthur Machen would have written had he been a humorist.

I also liked Baird Searles's book review. It was helpful. The rest of the stories were also quite enjoyable. Wightman's "In The Realm of The Heart, In The World of The Knife" I beheld with undiluted horror; Boyle's "On For the Long Haul" was a shocking story of survival-of-the-fittest or, perhaps, just the most violent; and all through Spinrad's "World War Last" I laughed like a loon (it depicted war as silly rather than terrifying, and with all the death-and-doom stories piling up on all sides, it's nice to see a change of pace without having to buy *National Lampoon*, too).

The September issue: What is this, do I find naught but praise for this bit of printed media? I've read all but Robinson's "Green Mars," and it was all good. My personal favorite is Bishop's "Gift from the GrayLanders." Seeing nuclear holocaust through the not-too-comprehending eyes of a very young boy made for some especially seizing images. Only question is, did he truly not suspect Humankind's suicide, or did he unconsciously block that knowledge for psychological well-being? On the other hand, he did seem to know that his relations were all dead . . . hmmm . . . that's why I like science fiction! You can

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explore the possibilities! Why not? "The Day We Really Lost the War" by Mueller was especially poignant. Loved it.

Just finished the whole issue, and was impressed with Robinson's "Green Mars." Not only did it give us the protagonist's struggle with himself, it gave plenty of details —what it would be like to live on earth's first terraformed planet, with respect to likely fauna/flora. Only thing I wasn't clear on was how the temperature change was accomplished. And it gave us all a vivid picture of Olympus Mons, plus supplied interesting side notes on the mountain-climbing hobby and the people who risk their lives for the sake of adventure and its own special reward.

Keep up the good work. I plan to keep reading this magazine, fer sure, like it's malibu, totally . . .

Kevin F. Peterson
VETS USA MEDDAC WAH
Ft. Bragg, NC 28307–5000

I'm glad you like the magazine, and we rather enjoy careful analyses of individual stories. As for the Azazel story, you are right—I have written twelve altogether, so far, though not all have appeared in Asimov's.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

At the risk of starting yet another endless controversy in your letters column, I simply had to write about something that has been bothering me for some time. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm a loyal follower of your magazine, with a complete collection of all ninety-six issues, and I number dozens of the stories published in those issues among my all time favorites. Unfortunately, I find myself becoming increasingly put off by the nature (note that I don't say quality) of the interior illustrations.

Consider the illustrations in the October 1985 issue, for instance. Pohl's "The Things that Happen" —the illustration depicts three gloomy faces clustered around a letter. None of the three is smiling. "Taking the Low Road"—a young man with a somber expression plays a guitar. "Snow Job"—a policeman holds a pistol to the heads of two frowning mafia types. "Scrabble with God"—a young boy pores over a scrabble game. "The Lake Was Full of Artificial Things"—an American GI stands armed behind a sad faced Vietnamese boy while an inset depicts weeping eyes in the background. "Green Days in Brunei"—a young man and a young woman sit in morose silence, and (second illustration) an older man stares vacantly from a full page portrait. Frankly, though your artists are all talented, most of their current work in your publication could hardly be called science fiction illustration. Not a single one of the drawings in the October issue would earn a single glance if posted in the art show at any SF convention. In fact, most would probably seem more at home in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* than in *IAsfm*. How I long for a good sense-of-wonder spacescape by Bonestell or Di Fate! And please don't tell me that styles must change with the times. I'd rather not live in a time when a dozen frowning

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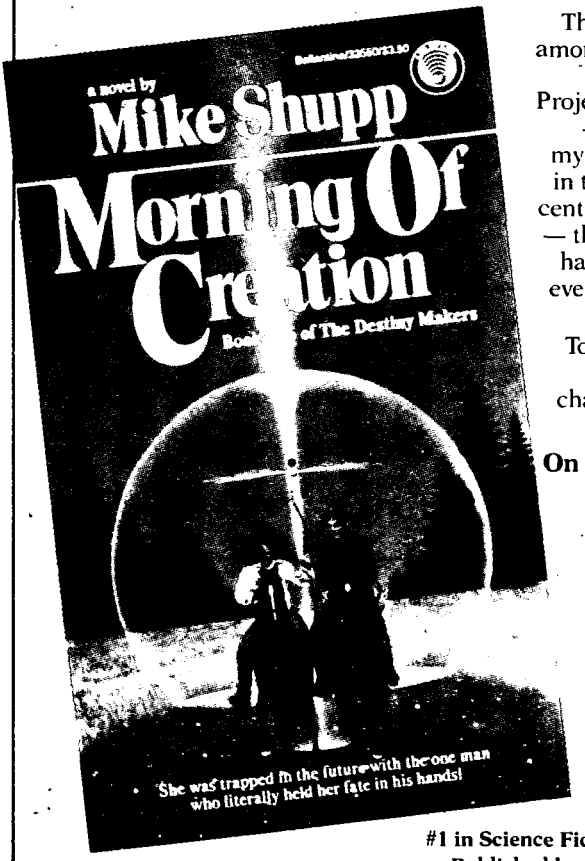
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faces reflect the current style of SF illustration.

Judge for yourself. Look again at the illustrations in the October or any recent issue and tell me how many you believe will ever make it into a future Great SF Art of the Eighties collection.

David George
Parma Heights, OH

I'm going to have to let your letter stand on its own. I doubt that there's a person in the United States who is as totally un-knowledgeable in the visual arts as I am. Do we really need to picture more smiles? Should the illustrations be happier? What do some of the other readers think?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor:

I imagine that thousands of your readers will whine and moan and turn up their noses at "Taking the Low Road," because it isn't science fiction. I hope you tell them off. "Taking the Low Road" was one of the most human stories I have ever read.

I can easily name a dozen stories that you've published that your readers have bitched at because *it's not SF*. (Overtly, that is.) Perhaps I'm a minority, but I hope you continue to offer stories like "Rim of the Wheel," "On for the Long Haul," and "How F. Scott Fitzgerald Became Beloved in Springfield."

Benjamin Gleisser
East Cleveland, OH

We don't like to be unkind to any readers. We all have the right to our likes and dislikes. I'm glad you like good stories even when they're borderline as far as the genre is concerned, but we don't expect to please everybody.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear S.C. Marlowe and Isaac;

Enclosed is my check for $29.97, for renewal of my subscription for *30* issues. I thought that was a neat trick—anyone who read your letter all the way through to the PS got an extra issue.

As long as I'm writing, I might as well tell you that I love the magazine. True, in every issue there may be one or two stories that I'm not exactly crazy about, but I read through to the end anyway. I've yet to find a story that I didn't finish, and I've been reading *Asimov's sfm* for more than five years. I don't read all the departmental articles, they're not all "my thing," but that's okay, there must be other readers who do enjoy them. I love Martin Gardner's stuff, even though I solve only a small percentage of the puzzles.

When the first articles about nuclear winter appeared in the Viewpoint department, I was a bit bothered. You see, I am a full-time volunteer for the Greater Cleveland Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, and as such, I eat, sleep and dream nuclear weapons and war information constantly. When *IAsfm* comes, I breathe a sigh of relief, and sink into my favorite chair for an evening of pure escapism and pleasure. So, when the nuclear related articles began to appear, I thought, "Oh, no, I can't get away from it, even here." But, on second thought I realized that

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this type of information belonged here. *IAsfm* readers are thoughtful people, concerned about the future of our planet, so this stuff is right up their alley.

I'm glad you gave Poul Anderson a chance to defend Star Wars. I could write many more pages countering his arguments, but Isaac did a better job than I could ever do. The most important point to make, and Isaac alluded to it is this: If the *Russians* announced their intention of building a large scale, workable defense system, while at the same time continuing to build more powerful and more accurate offensive weapons, what would *our* reaction be?

Roni Berenson
Mayfield Heights, OH

Science Fiction magazines have often dealt with current affairs where these had a science fictional angle. In my early youth, I remember articles and letters dealing with the possibility of reaching the Moon, and later the possibility of developing nuclear energy, and still later the possible outcome of nuclear war. We'd be shirking our duty if we didn't discuss Star Wars.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Sir/Madam;

Once again as I complained in 1978 or 1979, my July and August editions of *IAsfm* arrive by mail some several weeks after I had been drooling over the July edition and then the August edition on the newsstands. I don't know whether it was frugality or hostility that kept me from buying it off the newsstand and then giving the mail copy to the first person I saw on the street.

I must say there is some fascination in receiving two copies at once and trying to steal the time to read them in immediate succession. Although the writing in the July issue is marvelous and is of an academically intense nature, no article was a pleasure to me to read

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(except Martin Gardner, of course). As I have said earlier this does not discourage me from the magazine. There are thousands I hope, as does Dr. Asimov, that there are millions of readers and, thank the good Lord, no two are alike. I do not expect that every article or every issue will be written just for me.

However, by direct comparison, almost every item in the August issue was of great excitement to me. I, of course, exclude from my assessment the games and book reviews as they are for different people. But the whole nature of the edition was different.

Never, ever, cease the variety. Once we are all so much the same that we all like the same, who gives a damn.

Mind you, the fact that I could answer all of Martin Gardner's questions in the August issue may have influenced my bias.

The only criticism I would have of the August issue is that as much as I look forward to hearing more of the exploits of Azazel, "Logic is Logic" was a bit too contrived. I hope the good doctor will lose it somewhere in the middle of the much anticipated biography of that marvelous "imp."

Ed J. Brogden
Sarnia, Ontario
Canada

I'm afraid that all the exploits of Azazel are contrived. These stories are all satires of one sort or another and are not for a moment to be taken seriously.

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Your jesting response to Nolan P. Williams' report that freezing copies of *IAsfm* allows one to cleanly remove the labels hinted at a bit of skepticism. But it's true! Sufficient cooling *can* incapacitate certain adhesives. For instance, I remember reading that the physicists who eventually made the first observation of the pion had trouble with the adhesive they were using when they super-cooled the apparatus. They eventually had to tie the wafer layers together with thread.

The study of adhesives is still in its infancy, and the development of successful adhesives borders on alchemy. In fact, the last I heard, there was still no consensus among the various theories advanced to explain the mechanical basis for adhesion! Perhaps the thermal characteristics of adhesives will play an important part in deciding among these theories.

Paul R. Pudaite
1208 W. Park
Urbana, IL 61801

I don't necessarily jest as a sign of disbelief. Sometimes I jest just for the fun of jesting. Have you never enjoyed jesting?

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Ah, the rewards of procrastination! Instead of responding to your reply to a letter in the Sept. '85 issue, I can now respond to your excellent editorial in the Oct. issue.

I agree it is ironic that parents feel fairy tales are less violent than modern lit; however, I came across a point in an excellent book that should be required reading (espe-

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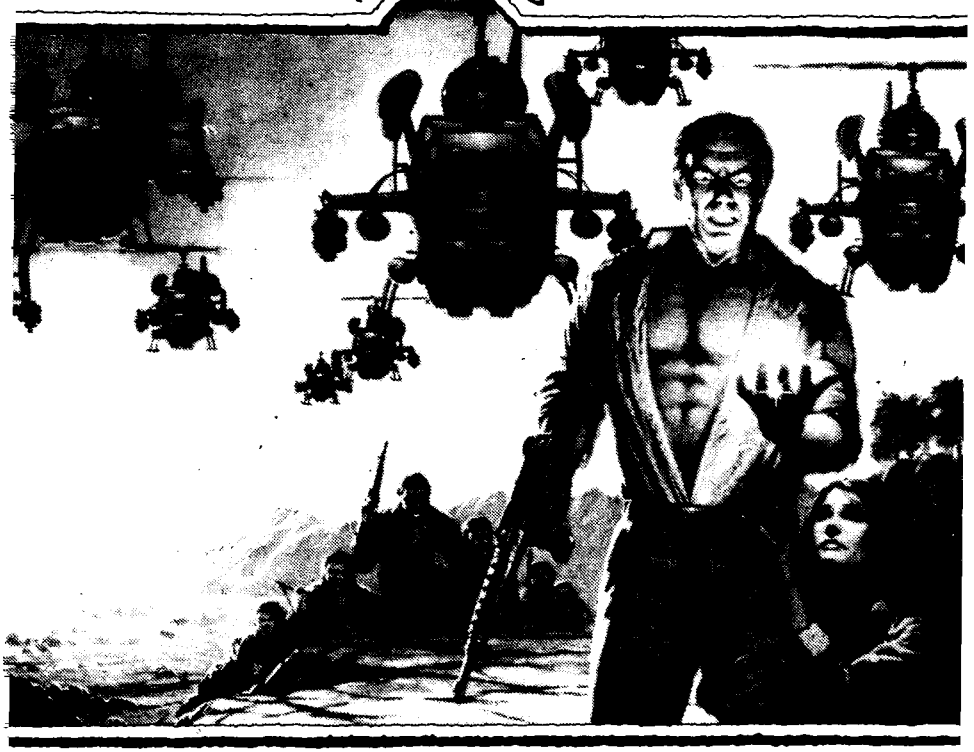
THE LAST MAN TO OWN IT WAS HITLER—
THE NEXT WOULD RULE THE WORLD.

THE MESSIAH STONE



A NOVEL OF
MERCENARY TERROR AND OCCULT DOMINION

BY

MARTIN CAIDIN

AUTHOR OF *MAROONED*,
THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN, AND
THE LAST COMMAND

BALL BOOKS

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cially for parents-to-be—it's frustrating to decide that I'll leave child-raising to the Experts and to then find that no one reads up on childrearing much less takes classes. As Ellen Peck said in her book *The Baby Trap* [(wherein **you** were quoted], more people should stop and think about being parents . . .).

Anyway, Robin Skynner and John Cleese point out in *Families and How To Survive Them* that fairy tales often correspond to the child's early life view, fantasies and projections. Reading or hearing them, especially from a calm parent, implies that these feelings can be overcome, which is helpful to the child.

I quote: "Such tales actually **encourage** them to project any unmanageable feelings into the witches and ogres, so if it's the parents or other loving grown-ups who are reading the stories to them, the children are getting reassurance that the grown-ups can cope with such feelings. . . . The safer the feelings feel, the less they'll need to be projected, which means the emotions become less extreme, produce less fear . . . The tendency towards 'paranoia' diminishes.

"The people who believe children should be protected against the violence in these traditional fairy stories could be giving children the wrong message—that there **is** something in the stories that scares the **parents** (which frightens the child). The stories **help** a child cope with his own baby-like violence, **provided** the parents supply the reassurance and love, and are not frightened of the child's violent, hateful feelings themselves."

I hope this is not misconstrued as a defense for the abuse described in such stories! I do think we benefit by trying to learn more about the inner workings and the "whys" of what we are.

If I may respond to a couple of other items: I greatly enjoyed "Green Mars"! I just love stories that mix in philosophical discussions with action—and what action—I find I am now intrigued by the idea of mountain-climbing! (having kids, no; hiking yes.) I found myself stopping after a quarter of the story to write down a philosophical insight that had occurred to me (which in a nutshell is that perhaps there **is** point to the growing itself, and not just the end result of growth . . .). Later in the story I find the two characters discussing part of Sartre's philosophy which ties in with my insight. Can I be a famous philosopher yet?

And lastly, in response to a lady's letter—while it's pointless to figure out which is the worst crime, I do not think it is "obvious" that repeated sexual abuse of a child is worse than repeated rape of a woman. *Both* are abuse! Both are crimes of violence, not crimes of passion, and both are an abuse of power!

Kathy D. Sandstrom
Indianapolis, IN

I'm not sure that I follow the reasoning in your quote. How do these child psychologists know *how the child reacts? How many have they studied? With what controls? Does it work that way if children have pornography read to them? Or are the psychologists just presenting hypotheses that sound good to them?*
—Isaac Asimov

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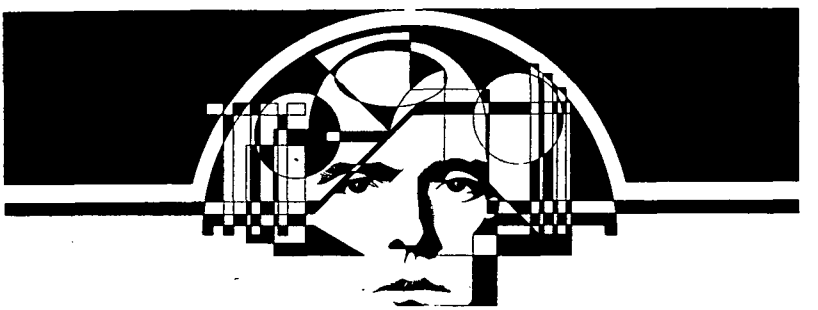
MARTIN GARDNER

HUSTLE OFF TO BUFFALO



The time: mid-twenty-first century. Place: a stretch of gleaming highway between New York City and Buffalo. I was in my car, the Hustle, in the sixth lane of a standard twenty-lane thruway. As readers may recall from a previous column, my Chinese-built car contained the latest protein-based supercomputer. It was connected to sensory devices that enabled it to see, hear, and even smell. It could engage in intelligent conversation.

As usual, when on long, boring trips, I liked to let the Hustle take over the controls. We would then while away the hours by asking each other interesting questions in the areas of mathematics and word play. The car is particularly fond of puzzles that relate to its experiences on thruways.

"I've just determined," said the Hustle, "that we have passed the halfway point on our trip to Buffalo. To be precise, the difference between the distance we've gone and the distance we have yet to go is precisely 70 km. Can you tell me how many more kilometers we have to travel to raise that difference to 100 km?"

"That's easy," I said. "We have to go thirty more kilometers."

"Wrong again!" shouted the Hustle, following the shout with its infuriating metallic chuckle. "The answer is 15 km."

Of course Hus was right. I had answered too hastily. "Okay, pal. You caught me on that one. Now here's one for you. A car passed us about thirty minutes ago with a bumper sticker that said 'I love New York'

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—except *love* was replaced by the playing-card symbol of a heart."

"I'm familiar with the sticker," the car said. "I see lots of them around the New York City area."

"The other day," I went on, "I saw a bumper sticker that started with the word *I*, followed by the card symbol for a spade. Can you guess what followed?"

The Hustle searched its memory banks for several minutes before it gave up.

"The answer," I said, "is 'my cats.' "

"I spade my cats?" said the Hustle. "It doesn't make sense."

I was surprised that Hus failed to get the pun. It listened silently while I explained.

"How about some tough geographical teasers?" I suggested. Hus knew everything in the latest world atlas, and geographical riddles were one of its specialties.

"Very well," said the car after a few seconds. "You used the adjective *tough*. It ends in *G* and *H*. How quickly can you name a state ending in *G*, and another state ending in *H*?"

I got the first one, but not the second. Can you name the two states before checking the answers on page 99?

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

After nearly three and a half years, this is my final column for *IAsfm*. Almost a hundred different SF and fantasy games were reviewed in depth or in thumbnail form since my first column appeared in the January, 1983 issue. I want to thank the editor, Gardner Dozois, and the managing editor, Sheila Williams, for tolerating the many missed deadlines, and for giving games a part of the limited space in the magazine.

Beginning next month, Matt Costello will be the new games columnist. Matt is an experienced reviewer and an entertaining writer. His fresh perspective and sense of humor should give this column a new burst of life.

I'm leaving, but I'm still writing. I now work for a new game magazine that I helped create. As a way of saying "thank you" to all the readers who've supported me, I have a special offer at the end of this column.

I'll leave you with a mini-survey of some of the great titles available in the areas of role-playing games, board games, etc. If I reviewed a particular title in a previous issue of *IAsfm*, I've noted the issue month and year in parenthesis.

There are four very popular SF role-playing games (rpg) now considered "hot," including: *Paranoia* (Oct. 85) by West End Games, a satirical game about a future society controlled by a paranoid computer; *Chill* (Sept. 85) by Pacesetter Ltd., for those who enjoy vampires and such; FASA Corporation's *Star Trek: The Role-Playing Game,* which, by the way, celebrates its twentieth anniversary this year (the TV series, not the game); and *Twilight: 2000* by Game Designers' Workshop, which puts you in the role of an American soldier caught in central Europe in the middle of World War III.

Since many *IAsfm* readers are interested in fantasy, I should also mention that *Dungeons & Dragons*® by TSR Inc. is still going strong after ten years, and two newer fantasy rpg are gaining recognition and devotees: *Middle-earth Role Playing* (Nov. 84) by Iron Crown Enterprises, based on the famous works of J.R.R. Tolkien; and *RuneQuest* by The Avalon Hill Game Company, which uses "low" magic as compared to the "high" magic of *D&D*® (no fireballs or walking undead).

Although there's simply not enough room to mention every game, I want to also recommend: *Traveller*® (June 83) by Game Designers' Workshop, the first SF rpg;

(continued on page 183)

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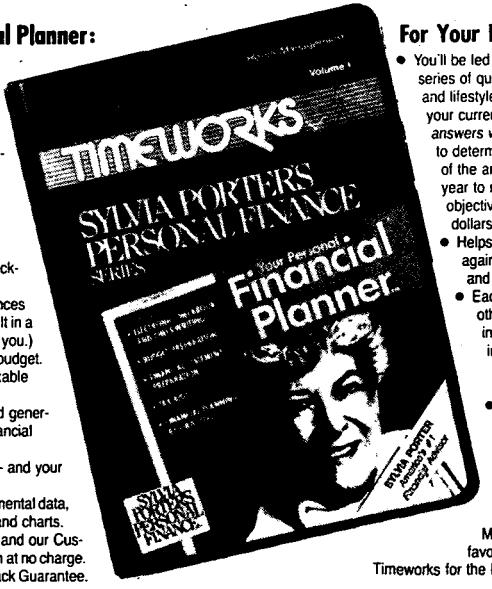

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VIEWPOINT

SCIENCE FICTION AND WAR

by
Joe Haldeman
art: Arthur George

Joe Haldeman made a grand sweep of the Hugo, Nebula, and Ditmar awards in 1975 with his outstanding novel, *The Forever War.* Some of the expertize for this novel on future warfare derived from his own experiences in Viet Nam. In the following Viewpoint, Mr. Haldeman looks at how first-hand experience, and the lack of, shapes a storyteller's description of war.

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VIEWPOINT

One night in the early seventies I was sitting in the living room of Robert Mills, who was then my literary agent, having cocktails with him and three of his other clients—Gordon R. Dickson, Harry Harrison, and Keith Laumer. I was definitely the junior member of the firm, so I kept my mouth shut and listened while they regaled each other.

The talk turned to World War II, in which they had all participated, and for about half an hour they swapped entertainingly ironic stories about sergeants, shavetails, KP, basic training. Abruptly, Robert Mills said, "Wait a minute. There's only one guy in this room who's actually *fought* in a war." And they all turned to me.

I guess I hauled out a couple of all-purpose Vietnam horror stories; all I really remember is the sudden being-on-the-hook sensation. But the memory of that evening came back strongly today, when the editor of this magazine called and asked me to write an essay about science-fiction war stories. There are two aspects of writing about war that I find especially interesting, and that boozy evening bears directly on one of them.

The literary reputations of those three men were all partly built on science fiction about war: Laumer's Bolo stories and some of the Retief saga; Harrison's *Bill the Galactic Hero* and, loosely, the *Deathworld* trilogy; Dickson's *Naked to the Stars* and, of course, the Dorsai part of the Childe epic. But Keith got to Germany after the Nazis surrendered, and Gordy stayed stateside learning how to teach people how to drive tanks. I've forgotten what Harry did, and since he lives in Ireland now I won't phone him, but I remember it wasn't combat.

What about other science fiction writers we associate with war? Robert Heinlein, as most people know, went into a military career out of Annapolis, but had to retire before World War II because of illness. Mack Reynolds was assigned to a tanker vessel in the Pacific but was never fired upon—he once told me he had witnessed six or seven wars, but always unarmed and from behind something solid!

(There's an interesting subset of science fiction writers whom

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we don't think of as "war writers," but who have been warriors. Hal Clement is a reserve officer in the Air Force. Gene Wolfe fought in Korea. Charles Grant and Howard Waldrop were in Vietnam. Brian Aldiss flew with the RAF in Burma, and has some truly hairy tales to tell, but he tells his war stories as straight novels, not science fiction.)

Of younger SF war writers—"younger" but old enough to have served in one of the post-WWII debacles—I can only come up with Jerry Pournelle, who fought in Korea; and David Drake, Gustav Hasford, and me, who saw combat in Vietnam. There are others who write about war, and well, but haven't been within half this planet of a hostile bullet. C. J. Cherryh was immune by reason of chromosome arrangement. Timothy Zahn was too young to be drafted for the last one (and may have the luck to be too old for the next one). No one would say that a Heinlein or Cherryh book is inferior to a Pournelle or Drake book because Heinlein and Cherryh lacked first-hand experience. The combat scenes in *Starship Troopers* are as gripping and convincing as you can find anywhere in the literature. But how can that be? He just made them up!

That's the reason they're good, of course. Bad books on writing and thoughtless English professors solemnly tell beginners to **WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW**, which explains why so many mediocre novels are about English professors contemplating adultery. Science fiction wouldn't exist, of course, if its authors were restricted to writing "what they know," since nobody has actually been to Mars or traveled through time, and so forth. Imagination is everything.

The classic example of this in war writing is not science fiction, but rather our greatest Civil War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*: the book was written thirty years after the war, by a young man who had never heard a shot fired. Crane supposedly wrote the book in response to a novel by Émile Zola. Crane was disgusted with the lousy job Zola did, given the advantage of having actually been shot at, and reportedly claimed that he could do better just sitting in his room. Civil War

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VIEWPOINT

veterans praised *The Red Badge of Courage* for its accuracy, but a halfway careful reading reveals that the accuracy wasn't in the description of action or hardware. Crane knew the inside of his own skull. He described it so well that we all see ourselves there. He did an excellent job of putting himself in the mind and heart of someone totally strange to his own experience. The march of technology may affect the gruesome details of war, what device kills you and how well and fast it works, but the fictionally important parts don't change. Pain, confusion, fear, heroism, cowardice; all are the same from Homer to Hemingway, from dumb rocks to smart bombs.

Hemingway is an interesting case, relevant to the issue of experience and, incidentally, this issue of this magazine. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is certainly one of the best American war novels, and his other writings about war are gripping and accurate. Most people are surprised to find out that he never was a soldier.* (He was the first American to be wounded on the Italian front in World War I, but at the time he was a Red Cross volunteer, delivering chocolate and cigarettes to the boys in the trenches.) He saw three major wars and a couple of minor ones, but always as an observer—sometimes passionately involved with one side of the conflict, but never a legitimate soldier. Usually he was a correspondent for a wire service; always he was gathering material for his books.

About experience and imagination, Hemingway had this to say:

> [Imagination] is the one thing beside honesty that a good writer must have. The more he learns from experience the more truly he can imagine. If he gets so he can imagine truly enough people will think that the things he relates all really happened and that he is just reporting. . . . [But] if it was reporting they would not remember it. When you describe something that has happened that day the

*To nip in the bud a nit-picking letter or two, I do know that Hemingway bragged about being a *soto tenente*, second lieutenant, in the Italian army, but that was a "provisional" rank the army gave to the American Red Cross volunteers. Not quite the same as being a soldier.

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> timeliness makes people see it in their own imaginations. A month later that element of time is gone. . . . But if you make it up instead of describe it you can make it round and whole and solid and give it life. You create it, for good or bad. . . . It is just as true as the extent of your ability to make it and the knowledge you put into it. (*Esquire*, October, 1935)

I don't want to get in the ring with Hemingway, but that essay always reminds me that there's a more or less mechanical aspect to the "experience" question that I've never seen addressed, perhaps because it seems self-evident. To put it baldly: it's harder to write authoritatively about something if you lack first-hand experience. For background, you have to go dig up a lot of descriptive details that another writer would simply know. What's more significant is that the emotional texture, the human part of it, has to be synthesized, from the writer's reading and perhaps corollary experience, rather than remembered. At six P.M. on my twenty-fifth birthday I was lying on my back on a muddy jungle trail trying to push a cleaning rod through the mud-plugged barrel of my useless M-16 while bullets whirred by inches over my face; people screamed in pain, cursing and dying all around while my partner lay next to me in a helpless foetal position, paralyzed by fear; my own sphincters fluttering, knees turned to water, scream crawling up my throat, the popcorn sound of our M-16s trivial under the fat chug-chug of the enemy's fifty-calibers and the bright loud bangs of their AK-47s—I don't have to put too much imagining effort into writing about a Vietnam ambush, and I could probably do a fair job describing an ambush in the twenty-fifth century, or the twelfth; a better job than I could synthesize from completely second-hand sources. In that sense, there's no substitute for having been there, at least so long as you do come back to write about it.

It has always seemed to me that Hemingway's position as war correspondent would be the ideal war situation for a writer, to be in the thick of things, observing, but not be encumbered with

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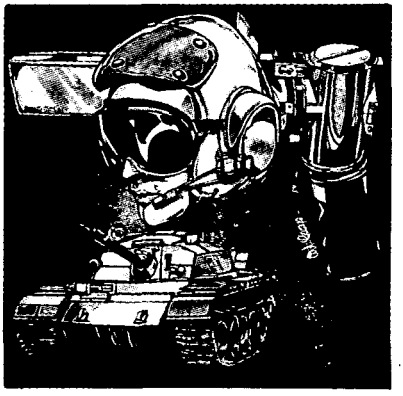
heavy weapons and tiresome orders ("Hey, private, you wanna put down the notebook and go hurl yourself at that machinegun nest?"), nor by the moral complications of daily doing murder, for however good a cause. Until recently, I hadn't come across any science fiction writer who'd had that enviable situation, though I'd read many good books by "mainstream" war correspondents, from Pyle's *Brave Men* to Herr's *Dispatches*. We do have our own now, though: this issue's cover story, "R & R," is the latest in a series of stories by Lucius Shepard, who has transmuted his experience as a war correspondent in Vietnam and Central America into a uniquely beautiful, troubling vision.

I've been restricting this discussion to serious, or "actual," science fiction, but of course there is the other kind. Star Wars. Buck Rogers. Our hero, hopelessly outnumbered, somehow being missed by hundreds of rayguns employed with vicious intent, his own shots achieving at least a one-to-one kill ratio, the aliens dying bloodlessly or (filthy wogs) with



"The march of technology may affect the gruesome details of war, what device kills you and how well and how fast it works, but the fictionally important parts don't change. Pain, confusion, fear, heroism, cowardice; all are the same from Homer to Hemingway, from dumb rocks to smart bombs."

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VIEWPOINT

ichor that's not red; while rescuing the virginal princess from a dire S&M/bondage durance ("But Lukie, I *liked* it!") and incidentally saving the universe from destruction at the dryly rubbing hands of a non-Caucasian creep.

It's conventional wisdom to decry the casual, almost bloodless, violence in this kind of entertainment, and from my own shaky pedestal as a realistic writer I've often maintained that violence has to be presented with no holds barred if any useful social purpose is to be served. But this (Star Wars) kind of entertainment has the vicious innocence of kittens swatting and biting, and perhaps serves a similar training function. If we can change the adult world, the children's world will follow. And as to the guaranteed pernicious effect of this kind of play . . . try to find a male pacifist who as a child played save-the-whales rather than soldier.

This is not to say that I totally disagree with the nay-sayers, though I think my repugnance toward Rambo-style invincibility and shoals of irrelevant Death Star corpses comes from a different direction. Less violence, I'll go along with—but when it comes on the screen, show it as it actually is: painful, undignified, drawn out, messy. It would be pleasant, too, if the perpetrator were to be affected by the deed, and sometimes show more reaction than a satisfied nod or a smirk. Actually killing people can lead to nightmares and drink; sometimes rubber rooms and Thorazine.

I've been shot twice, soldier and civilian, and although I no longer bear any malice toward the Vietnamese infantryman who ventilated me, I have spent some time contemplating what I would like to do to the young goofball who nailed me from a passing car while I was bicycling down a quiet suburban road in Florida. It would be appropriate to have him pedal by *me* while I charitably try not to hit any of his vital organs with my own shaky pistol—and there's a curious possibility that he might amiably agree to do it, fair's fair after all, and be genuinely surprised at the sudden painful shock of the bullet. I've never met the boy (no license number; case closed) but I think it's reasonable to assume

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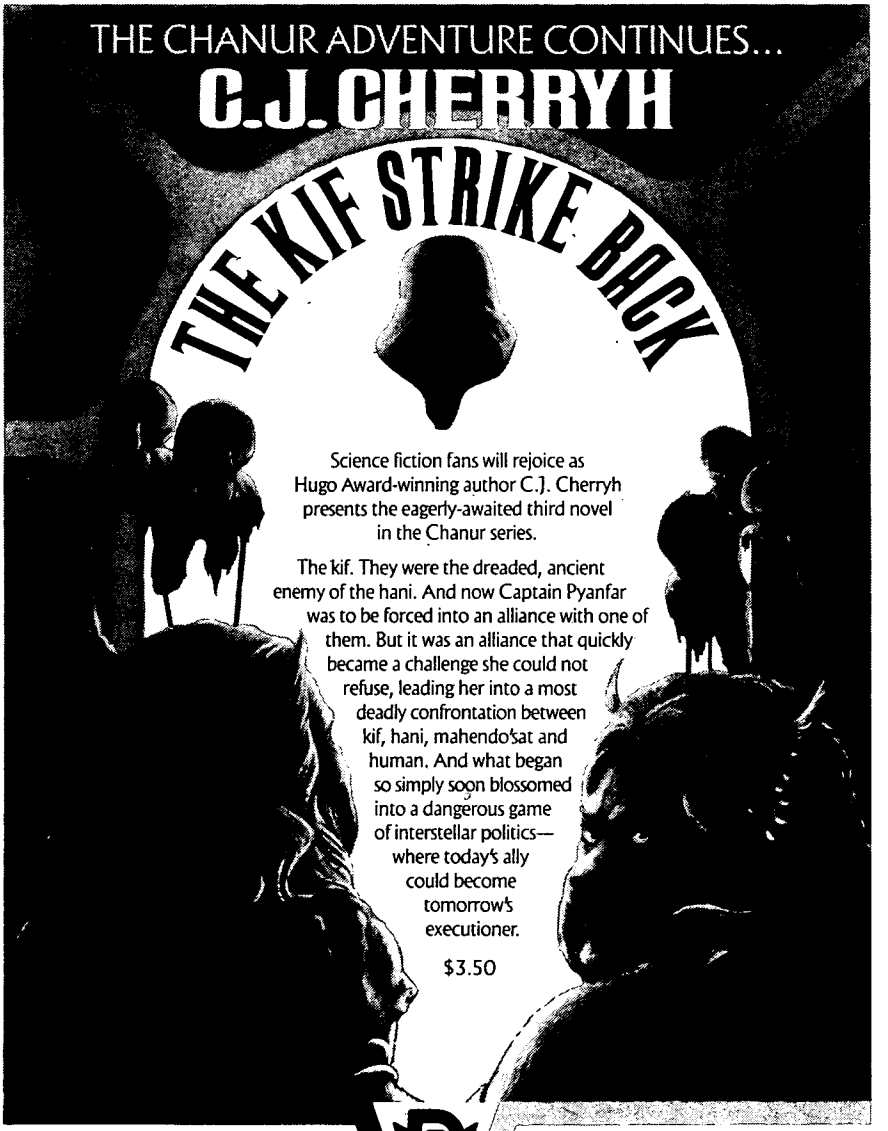
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that he was not some sort of wild-eyed Mansonian maniac, but rather a dumb kid with a gun and a few beers under his belt and a temporary or permanent lack of sense—" 'bout two bricks shy of a load," as we say in the South—whose limited life script owes a lot to the likes of Roadrunner and Sylvester Stallone (his fleshly avatar). There might even be a little Luke Skywalker in there. And although it stretches the bounds of credibility, it's just barely possible that he might have read one of *my* books: thrilled to the squishy dismemberment of Taurans in *The Forever War*; marched resolutely to senseless death inside "The Private War of Private Jacob"; felt the bite of steel in "The Only War We've Got." If such a person did read any science fiction, he would probably gravitate toward war stories, and I've written some.

When that thought occurred to me, I at first dismissed it. *My* readers are sensible, peaceloving men and women who don't conduct target practice on passing strangers. When *my* stories are about war, they don't celebrate it, but rather try to demonstrate its futility and insanity. That's how I *feel*. However:

There's a quality to any work of fiction or drama that psychologists might call "projective"—like an inkblot test, useful not in what the work objectively *is*, but in what it reveals about the observer. We go to see *Rambo* and we all watch a lone man penetrating enemy territory to liberate prisoners of a forgotten war, in spite of the Powers That Be inexplicably wanting the prisoners to stay where they are. (I won't tell you how it turns out.) That's the story, but it's not the movie. Waiting in line, I overheard a young woman who'd seen it before waxing almost orgasmic about how exciting and uplifting it was. Then I saw it, and came out of the theater numbed. It was brutal, simplistic "pornography of violence"; a lumbering snuff film for the far right. It had no more to do with actual war and heroism than a *Playboy* cartoon has to do with actual love and sex. The cartoon doesn't take itself seriously, though, and not many people mistake it for the real juicy thing. People go to *Rambo* and do have their buttons

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pushed about war; do have attitudes reinforced or even changed. I would trade all I have to be allowed to take anybody who came out of that movie feeling good and transport him, or her, for just sixty seconds, to the humid green hell of actual jungle warfare. They don't have to be hurt themselves; just be *there*, to watch and listen and smell. Hear the noble last words, last sounds, of a man whose body was torn off at the balls. Comfort a man while he dies choking on blood puked up from his ripped-open stomach. Watch the humorous antics of someone trying to put his intestines back in (they actually do slide between your fingers). Take out your Gray's *Anatomy* and put names to the various parts of the landscape. Just sixty seconds. Then let's go see that movie again. Enjoy the popcorn.

I'm only picking on Stallone* because he's the biggest target around, and I apologize to editors and readers who didn't think they were paying for a movie review.

*It is Stallone and the movie I'm picking on, not the good novel *First Blood*, by David Morrell. The strutting musclebound caricature of the movie only vaguely resembles the book's Rambo, who has the complexity and unpredictability of real life about him, and who hurts.

"A lot of written science fiction, and a *hell* of a lot of written fantasy, differs from *Rambo* only in the number of people exposed to it and the order of magnitude of the income it generates, and not in its cynical or (to be charitable) careless exploitation of gratuitous violence."

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But it's not irrelevant. A lot of written science fiction, and a *hell* of a lot of written fantasy, differs from *Rambo* only in the number of people exposed to it and the order of magnitude of the income it generates, and not in its cynical or (to be charitable) careless exploitation of gratuitous violence.

Science fiction deserves better. Science fiction is different from other forms of genre fiction in that at some level, however low, it's meant to tickle the intellect; and because if it's done at all well, it has a unique power to engage the reader's imagination. A writer with that kind of power at his or her disposal ought to exercise it with some discretion. I wouldn't go so far as to say that misusing the gift is immoral, if only because I don't want to step off this soap box and up onto a pedestal, but every time it's used cheaply it wastes part of the writer's potential, forever, and serves to further trivialize the genre.

Anybody who writes something as high-minded as that statement has set himself up for literary snipers. A quarter or a third of the million or so words I've published have been related to war, and some of it certainly must evidence lapses in judgment, taste, or even morality. Especially if considered out of context. Those of you out there who snipe for amusement, please do keep those cards and letters rolling in. Replies not guaranteed.

It's not a problem that can be wrapped up neatly. Exploitation of violence is repugnant, but what's even more repugnant to me is someone standing up on his hind legs and telling me, for whatever noble purpose, what I can or cannot write about, or how I have to write—or even what in my writing I ought to feel good about and guilty about. Yet I'm coming close to pounding that pulpit myself. For every one of us who is serious, even somber, about this problem, there is at least one writer—maybe a squad or a platoon of them—who uses war in an offhand way, as a convenient setting for manufactured entertainments. Just this one time I have to come down on the side of the Devil, and say that they are dead wrong, and socially dangerous.

So shoot me. ●

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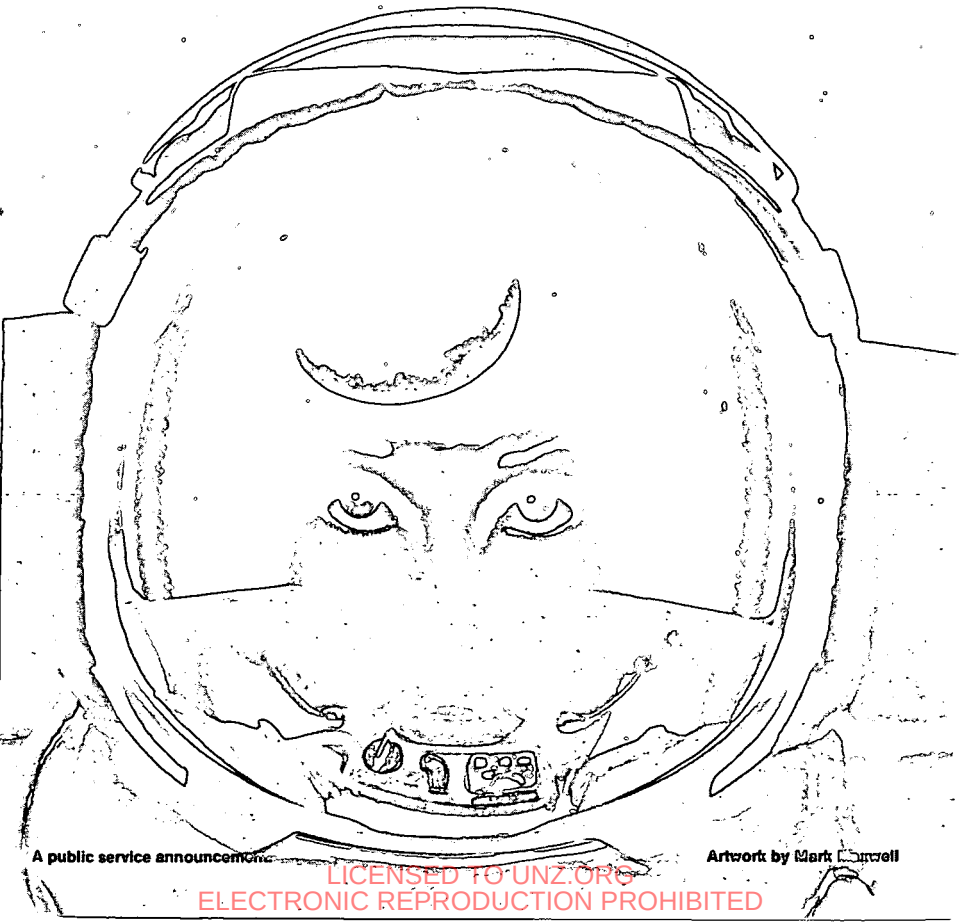

A public service announcement

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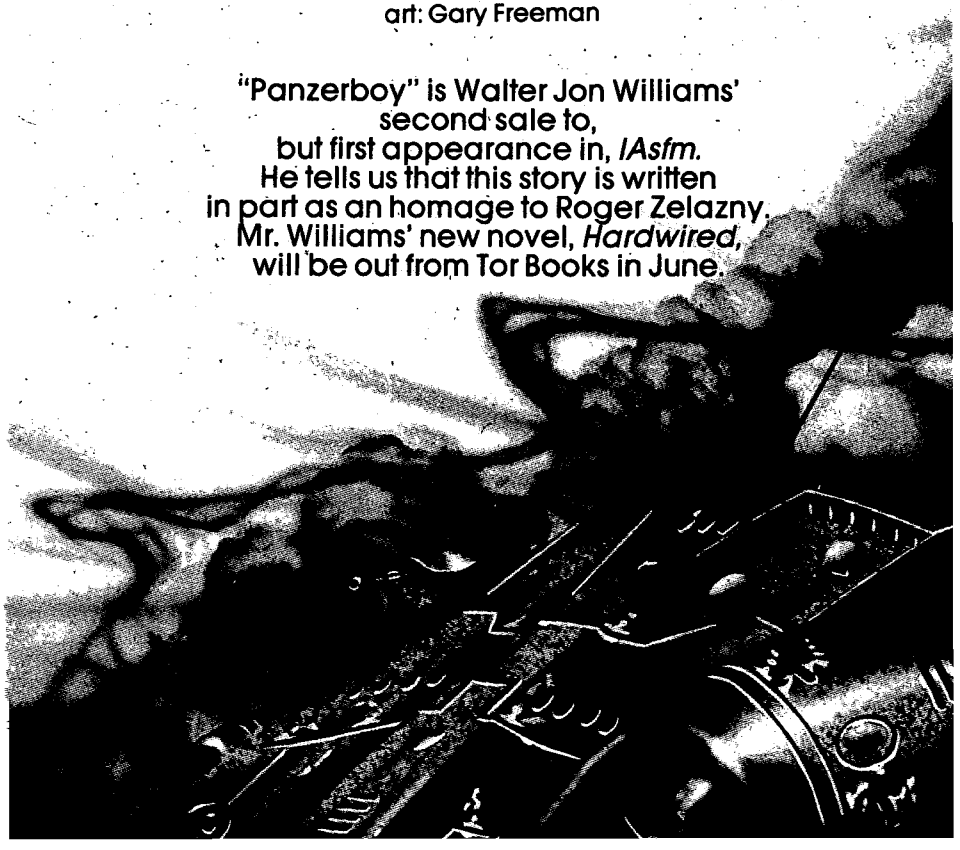
by
Walter Jon Williams

PANZERBOY

art: Gary Freeman

"Panzerboy" is Walter Jon Williams' second sale to, but first appearance in, *IAsfm.* He tells us that this story is written in part as an homage to Roger Zelazny. Mr. Williams' new novel, *Hardwired,* will be out from Tor Books in June.



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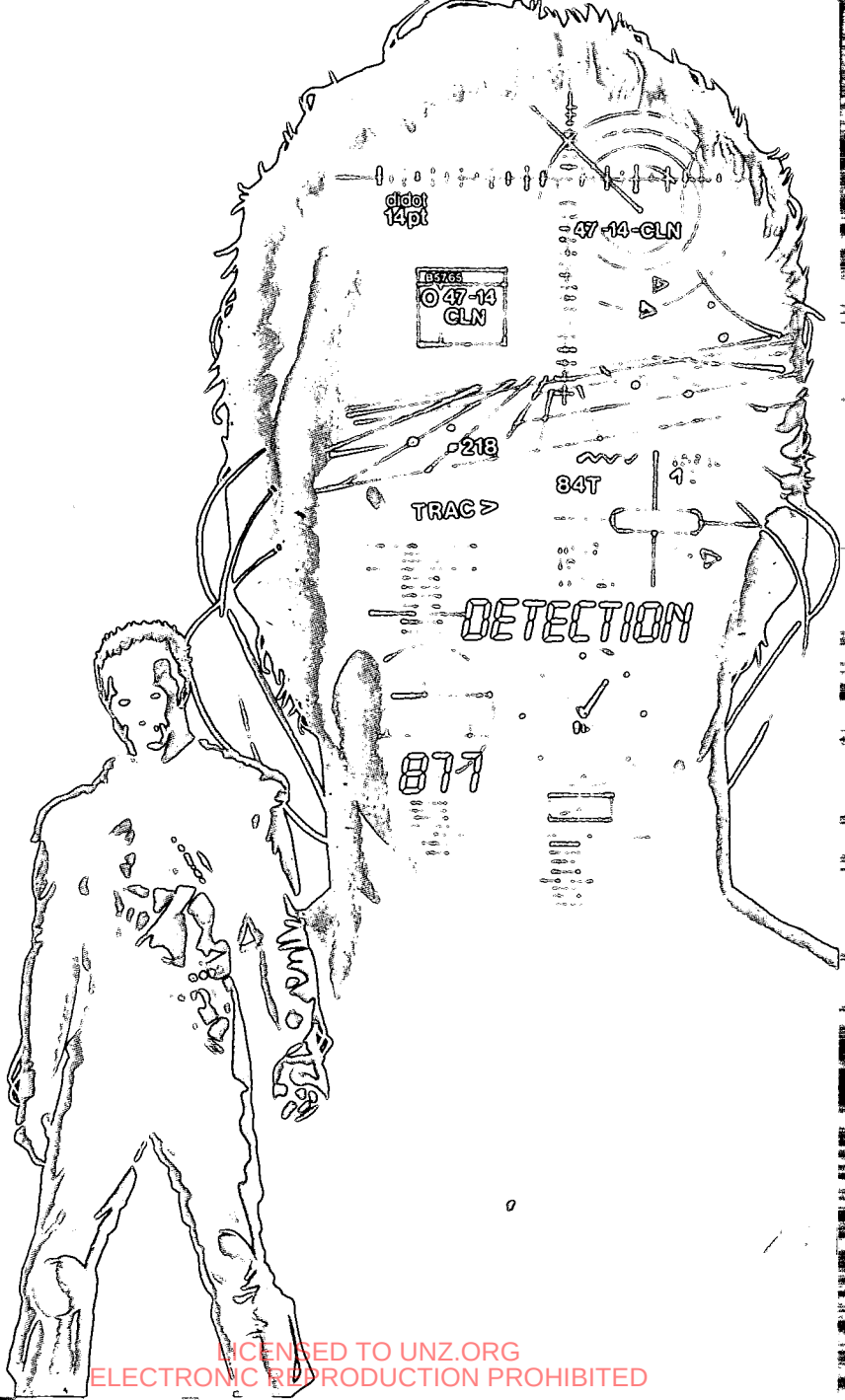

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As he stands in the warm summer of eastern Colorado, a steel guitar is playing a lonesome song somewhere in the back of Cowboy's mind.

"For the laws I have a certain respect," he says. "For mercenaries I have none."

Arkady Mikhailovich Dragunov stares at him for a half-second. His eyes are slitted against the brightness of the sun. The whites seem yellowed Fabergé ivory and the irises old steel darkened like a sword. Then he nods. It's the answer he wants.

Discontent rises in Cowboy like a drifting wave of red sand. He doesn't like this man or share his strange, suspicious, involuted hatreds. An excitement is tingling in his arms, his mind, the crystal inside his skull. Missouri. At last. But Arkady is oblivious to the grandeur of what is going to take place, wants only to fit Cowboy into accord with his own self-image, to remind Cowboy again that Arkady is not just a boss but the big boss, that Cowboy owes him not simply loyalty but servitude. A game that Cowboy, to Arkady's frustration, will not play.

"God damned right," Arkady says. "We know they're offering their services to Iowa and Arkansas. We don't want that."

"If they find me I'll do what I can," Cowboy says, knowing that in this business, talk is necessarily elliptical. "But first they've got to find me. And my op plan should give me a good chance of staying in the clear."

Arkady wears an open-necked silk shirt of pale violet with leg-of-mutton sleeves so long they seem to drag in the dust, an embroidered Georgian sash wound twice around his waist, and tight, polished Cossack boots over tighter black trousers that have embroidery on the outer seams. His hair, at intervals, stands abruptly on end and flares with static discharges, a different color each time. The latest thing from the Havana boutiques of the Florida Free Zone. Cryo max, he says proudly. Cowboy knows Arkady couldn't be cryo max if he spends his life trying; it isn't in him. In fashion he is a follower, not a leader. Here he's just impressing the hicks and his toadies.

The Russian is a big, brusque man, fond of hugging and touching the people he's talking to; but he's got a heart like superconducting hardware and eyes to match, and it would be foolish to consider him as a friend. Thirdmen do not have cargo space for friends.

Arkady crimps the cardboard tube of a Russian cigaret and strikes a match. His hair stands on end, suddenly bright orange. Imitating the match, Cowboy thinks, the steel guitar still bending notes in his mind. . . .

The Dodger, Cowboy's manager, strolls from where the panzer is being loaded for the run. "Best make sure your craft is trimmed," the Dodger says.

Cowboy nods. "See you later, Arkady." Arkady's hair turns green.

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"I could see you were getting impatient," the Dodger says as soon as they're out of earshot. "Try not to be so superior, will you?"

"It's hard not to be," Cowboy says. "When Arkady's around." The Dodger flashes him a disapproving look.

"He must have to butter his ass," Cowboy adds, "to get into those pants." He can see the lines around the Dodger's eyes crinkle as he tries to suppress his laughter.

Dodger is an older man with a tall forehead and straight black hair going grey, so lean he can order three desserts at a time without fear of corroding his arteries. Cowboy likes him—and trusts him, too, at least to a point, the point being giving the Dodger the codes to his portfolio. He might be naïve, but he is not stupid.

Cowboy watches as the last pieces of cargo are stowed, certain the panzer is trimmed, that all's ready for the run across what the Dodger calls Damnation Alley. The Dodger has a poetic way of speaking when the mood is on him.

"What's my cargo?" Cowboy asks. He smiles diffidently, wondering if the Dodger can see the thoughts behind his artificial eyes. The suspicions, the discontents. "Just for the record."

The Dodger is busy cutting a plug of tobacco. "Chloramphenildorphin," he says. "There's going to be a shortage on the East Coast. The hospitals will pay a lot. Or so the rumors say." He grins. "So be of good cheer. You're going to make sure a lot of sick people stay alive."

"Nice to be sort of legal," Cowboy says. "For a change."

He looks at the panzer, all angular armor and intakes, ugly and graceless compared to a delta. He owns this one but he hasn't given it a name, doesn't think of it in the same way. A panzer is just a machine, not a way of life.

Cowboy climbs on top of the panzer and sits down in the forward compartment. He puts a stud in his right temple and suddenly his vision is expanded, as if his two eyes were stretched clear around his head and a third eye surfaced on top. He calls up the maps he has stored on comp and displays begin pulsing like strobes on the inside of his skull. His head has become a ROM cube. Inside it he sees fuel trucks spotted about the Alley, ready to move when he needs to be topped up; there is his planned route, with deviations and emergency routes marked, drawn in wide bands of color; there are old barns and deep coulees and other hiding places spotted like acne on the displays, all marked down by Arkady's scouts.

Cowboy fishes a liquid-crystal datacube out of his jacket pocket and drops it into the trapdoor, and the display flares with another series of pinpricks. His own secret hiding places, the ones he prefers to use, that he keeps up to date with scouting forays of his own. Arkady, he knows,

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wants this trip to succeed; but Cowboy doesn't know everyone in the thirdman's organization and knows that some of them might have been bought by the privateers. Best to stick with the places he knows are safe.

The panzer rocks slightly and Cowboy can hear the sound of footsteps on the Chobham Seven armor. He looks up and sees the Dodger's silhouette through the dorsal hatch. "Time to move, Cowboy," he says, and then spits his chaw over the side.

"Yo," says Cowboy. He unplugs himself and stands up in the cramped compartment. His Kikuyu pupils contract to pinpricks as he puts his head out the hatch and looks west, in the direction of the wine dark Rockies he knows are somewhere over the horizon. He feels, again, the strange lassitude infecting his heart, a discontent with things as they are.

"Damn," he says. There is longing in the word.

"Yeah," says the Dodger.

At six feet three inches Cowboy stands tall, but a few years ago he stood miles taller, an atmosphere jock who spread his contrails from one coast to the other. Delivering the mail, mail being a euphemism for whatever it was that came his way. Nowadays the Midwest's air defenses are too strong to challenge, but the mail still gets itself delivered by panzer. The new system has its own challenges, but personally Cowboy prefers aircraft. If it had been up to him he would never have left the skies.

Now he's twenty-five, old for this job. His nerves are hardwired to the max and he's got his Kikuyu eyes from his days as a pilot. He disdains the use of headsets and his head bears five ceramic sockets, each decorated with silver wire and turquoise chips, for putting the peripherals directly into his brain, saving him milliseconds when it counts. Most people so equipped wear their hair long to cover the sockets, afraid of being called buttonheads or worse, but Cowboy disdains that practice, too; his fair hair is cropped close to the skull and here in the West, where people have an idea of what these things mean, they see the sockets and regard him with awe.

Cowboy enjoys being a celebrity, enjoys the gold bars and the stock, the drugs and the women . . . it's nice, but they're really just ways of keeping score. Right now he has a lead over the rest of the pack so substantial it looks like he'll be in the lead forever, or at least until he makes his first mistake.

He looks at the horizon with his artificial eyes, wondering if there will ever be a pair of eyes good enough to spot the source of his discontent.

"I wish I was flying," he says.

"Yeah." The Dodger looks pensive. "Some day, Cowboy," he says. "We're just waiting for the technology to roll around the other way again."

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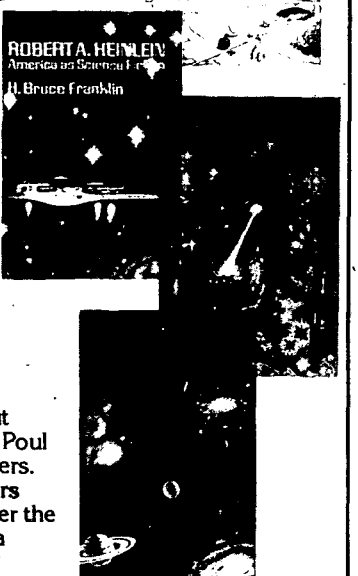

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Cowboy can see Arkady standing by his armored Packard, sweating in the shade of a cottonwood, and suddenly the discontent has a name. "Chloramphenildorphin," he says. "Where's Arkady get it?"

"We're not paid to know those kind of things," the Dodger says.

"Hijacking. Secret labs. Paying off men in the complexes. That's the official word. But in quantities like this?" Cowboy's voice turns thoughtful as he gazes across the gap of bright sky between himself and the thirdman. "Do you think it's true?" he asks. "That the Orbitals are running the thirdmen just like everything else?"

The Dodger glances nervously at Arkady and shrugs. "It don't pay to make those kind of speculations out loud," he says.

"I just want to know who I'm working for," Cowboy says. "If the underground is run by the overground, then we're working for the people we're fighting, *que no*?"

The Dodger looks at him crookedly. "I wasn't aware that we were fighting anybody a-tall, Cowboy," he says.

"You know what I mean." That if the thirdmen and panzerboys are just participating in a reshuffling of finances on behalf of the Orbital blocs, then the dream of being the last free Americans on the last free road is a foolish, romantic delusion. And where is Cowboy then, poor thing? A dupe, a hovercraft clown. Or worse than that, a tool.

The Dodger gives him a weary smile. "Concentrate on the privateers, Cowboy, that's my advice," he says. "You're the best panzerboy on the planet. Stick at what you're good at."

Cowboy forces a grin and gives him the finger, and then closes the dorsal hatch. He strips naked and sticks electrodes to his arms and legs, then runs the wires from the electrodes to collars on his wrists and ankles. He attaches a catheter, then dons his g-suit, sits on his acceleration couch and attaches cables to the collars, straps himself onto the couch. While his body remains immobile his muscles will be exercised by electrode to keep the blood flowing. In the old days, before this technique had been developed and the jocks were riding their headsets out of earth's well and into the long diamond night, sometimes their legs and arms got gangrene. Next he plugs all five studs into his head and pulls on his helmet, careful not to stress the wires coming out of his skull. He closes the mask across his face. He tastes rubber and hears the hiss of anaesthetic, loud here in the closed space of the helmet.

His body will be put to sleep while he makes his run through the Alley. He is going to have more important things to do than look after it.

Cowboy does the chore swiftly, automatically. All along, there is a feeling: I have done this too often not to know what it's about.

Neurotransmitters awaken the five sockets in his head and Cowboy watches the insides of his skull blaze with incandescent light, the liquid-

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crystal data matrixes of the panzer molding itself to the configuration of his mind. His heart beats faster; he's living in the interface again, his expanded mind racing like electrons through the circuits, into the metal and crystal heart of the machine. He can see around the panzer a full 360 degrees, and there are other boards in his strange mental space for engine displays and the panzer systems. He does a system check and a comp check and a weapons check, watching the long rows of green as they light up. His physical perceptions are no longer in three dimensions: the boards overlap and intertwine as they weave in and out of the interface, as they mirror the subatomic reality of the electronics and the data comprising the dying day outside.

He closes his lids over his plastic and steel eyes and runs over the green engine lights again. Neurotransmitters lick with their chemical tongues the metal and crystal in his head, and electrons spit from the studs, racing along the cables to the engine starters, and through a dozen sensors Cowboy feels the bladed turbines reluctantly turn as the starters moan, and then flame torches the walls of the combustion chambers and the blades spin into life with a screaming whine. Cowboy monitors the howling exhaust as it belches flame. On his mental displays Cowboy can see the Dodger and Arkady and the ground crew watching the panzer through the blurred exhaust haze, and he looks fore and aft and checks the engine displays and sees another set of green lights and knows it's time to move.

The howling of the engines beats at his senses. His crew has spent the last week tuning them, running check after check, making certain they will perform beyond expectations. They're military surplus jets, monsters. They aren't built to ride this close to the ground and without Cowboy's straddling this mutant creature every inch of the way they're going to run away with him.

Inside the rubber tasting mask his lips draw back from his teeth and he grins a skeletal grin: he will ride this beast across the Alley and through the web of traps set up this side of the Mississippi and add another layer of permeable sky to the distance separating him from the lesser icons of glory that are the other panzerboys, more proof that the flaming corn-alcohol throbs through his chest like blood and that the shrieking exhaust flows from his lungs like breath, that his eyes beam radars and his fingers can flick missiles forth like pebbles. Through his sensors he can taste the exhaust and see the sky and the prairie sunset, and part of his mind can feel the throbbing radio energies that are the enemy's search planes, and it seems to him that the watchers and the escort vehicles seem lessened, separated from him by more than a few hundred yards—he will be taking the panzer over the Line, and they will

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not, and he looks at them from within his interface, from his immeasurable height of radiant glory and pities them for what they do not know.

At the moment the ultimate beneficiaries of his run—the hospitals in New England, the thirdmen, his own portfolio, possibly the immeasurably distant, insanely gluttonous creatures who ride their Orbital factories and look down on the earth as a fast-depleting treasure house to be plundered—all these fade down long redshifting lines of recession, as if blurred by distance and the flaming jet's exhaust. The reality is here in the panzer. Discontent is banished. Action is the thing, and all.

He diverts a part of the jet's exhaust and another set of fans whine into life, lifting the ground-effect panzer with a lurch onto its inflatable self-sealing cushion. The Pony Express will deliver the mail or know the reason why.

Microwave chatter spins around his ears likes gnats, and he wishes he could brush it away with his hands.

"Arkady wants to say a few words, Cowboy." The voice is the Dodger's, and Cowboy can tell he doesn't think this is a good idea.

"I'm sort of getting ready here," Cowboy says.

"I know that." Shortly, sounding as if his mouth is full of tobacco. "Arkady thinks it's important."

Cowboy concedes, watching the green lights, seeing maps flash behind his eyes. "Whatever Arkady wants," he says.

Arkady has the mic too close to his lips. His P's and B's sound like cannonshots. Put the damn headset on your *head*, Cowboy thinks in irritation. That's what it's for, not to hold it to your mouth.

"I've got a lot at stake here, Cowboy," he says. "I'll be in the plane and with you all the way."

"I am comforted as hell to hear that, Arkady Mikhailovich," Cowboy says. He knows Arkady will have laid off a lot of his costs with the other thirdmen, who wanted the Missouri privateers broken as much as he did.

There is a pause on the other end as Arkady digests this.

"I want you to come back," Arkady says. Cowboy can hear the sounds of temper as if from far away. The thirdman's voice drums on and on, every plosive a barrage. "But I fixed up that machine for a reason, and I don't want you to come back without it. And I don't want you to come back without having used it. Understand? Those fucking privateers are gonna get what's coming to 'em."

"Ten four," Cowboy says, and before Arkady can ask what the hell ten four is supposed to mean Cowboy opens his throttles and the howl, heard with utter clarity over Arkady's mic, buries the Russian's speech beneath a banshee shriek. Though he can't hear Arkady anymore Cowboy is

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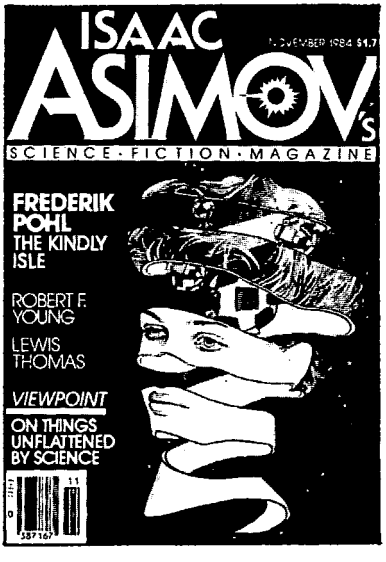

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fairly certain that the distant yammering he's hearing through his crystal contains a fair amount of abuse. He smiles.

"Adios, muchachitos," Cowboy laughs, and takes the panzer off the road. The farmer here, a friend of free enterprise and true, is getting paid for his wheat being trampled every so often and the Pony Express is going to have a clear run for the Line. The radar detectors pick up only weak signals from far away and Cowboy knows no one's looking at him.

The beast roars like the last lonely dinosaur and trembles as it gains way. Mental indicators climb their columns from blue to green to orange. Ripe wheatstraw flies out behind in a plume. Cowboy has a steel guitar playing a lonesome cadenza somewhere in his mind. He cranks up the flame and is doing over a hundred when he blazes through some poor citizen's bobwire and crosses the Line.

His radar is forward-looking and strictly limited: it's to keep him out of pits and gullies and let him know when there might be a house or vehicle sitting in his way. It sends out a fairly weak signal and it shouldn't be detected by anything unless the detector is so close the first contact would be visual anyway. Kansas has most of its defenses out this way and if he trips anything it should be now.

The horizon is a blur of dark emptiness marked by an occasional silo. Any enemy radars are far away. The moon rises and the engines howl and Cowboy keeps his speed in check so as not to raise a dust signature that might be picked up on radar. He wants to save his systems for the real test. Missouri. Where the privateers crouch in the sky, snarling and ready to spring.

Cattle scatter from the panzer's scream. Robot harvesters sweep through the fields, standing like stately alien sentinels in pools of brilliant light, moving alone, unable to detect the panzer as it sweeps across the land. Cowboy gets a stronger radar signal to the north and knows a picket plane is coming his way. The panzer's absorbent camouflage paint sucks up radar signal like a thirsty elephant but Cowboy slows still further and turns, lowering his infrared profile and making a wide swing away from any trouble. The picket plane moves on, undisturbed.

The panzer crosses the Little Arkansas south of McPherson and Cowboy knows he'll make it across the state without trouble. The defenses are behind him. The only trouble will come if he rides right across the track of a state trooper when crossing a road, and even then the authorities will have to somehow scramble a chopper in time. He doesn't think it will happen.

And it doesn't. In the deep violet shadow of some crumbling grain silos near Gridley, the panzer sweeps out of the darkness and scares the bejesus out of the sleeping kid in the cab of a fuel truck. Cowboy cycles his

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engines down and waits for the sweet cool alcohol to settle into the tanks. Already he can feel the pulsing radars questing out from the Missouri line. Stronger than anything he's seen yet. The privateers are not going to be easy.

"They're undercapitalized, Cowboy," Arkady has told him. "They can't afford to lose any equipment. They've got to score a lot of successes right away and get some cargo. Otherwise they're in trouble."

Since the Rock War, when the Orbital communities declared their independence by flinging ten thousand-ton chunks of nickel-iron onto the planet that was trying, in its divided, confused, and ultimately hopeless way to maintain some manner of control over the critical and nearly self-sufficient economies they had become, the U.S.A. has been balkanized far beyond the wildest dreams of the old States Rights crowd. The so-called central government no longer has its hands on interstate commerce and the result is a wild rush to impose tariffs all across the Midwest. In the West, close to the spaceports in California and Texas where the finished goods were coming down from the manufacturies in orbit, the borders are free, but the Midwest sees no reason why it shouldn't profit from anything crossing its territory and slammed a heavy duty on goods that passed through the states en route to elsewhere. Air transport is limited and expensive—the Orbitals don't like having earthly competition, and restrict it when they can—and the ground is the only way to go.

Which leaves the Northeast out of luck, as far as the distribution of Orbital-built products were concerned. They get some from the spaceports in the Florida Free Zone, but the Free Zone is under Bloc control and the Orbitals like to keep the market hungry for their product. Artificial scarcity is the name of the game, and the Northeast pays with its dwindling wealth for the scraps the Orbitals dole out. The West has more to offer the Orbitals and the goods are cheaper and more abundant there—cheap enough to ship them to the markets in the northeast at a fat profit, so long as there isn't much duty to pay along the way.

And so, years ago, the first atmosphere jocks rode their supersonic deltas across the Alley with their midnight loads of contraband. And the Midwest responded, first by sending up radar planes and armed interceptor aircraft, then, when the action shifted from planes to panzers, by strengthening their ground defenses.

And now, in Missouri, by licensing privateers. The state's been unable to keep up with the changes in smuggling technology, and so they've decided to license a local corporation to chase the contraband for them. The fact that the Constitution authorizes only the federal government to grant letters of marque and reprisal is ignored; the Constitution is a dead letter anyway, in the face of Orbital superiority.

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The privateers are authorized to shoot to kill, and are to be rewarded by ownership, free and clear, of whatever contraband they can secure. Reports have spoken of impressive arrays of airborne radar, of heat sensors and weird sound detectors and aircraft full of sensing missiles and bristling with guns.

Cowboy's hated missing a show like that. He's been salivating for Missouri all along, and has only been lacking backers. He is glad the thirdmen are finally showing a little spine, particularly since the spine comes in the form of state-of-the-art sensors and weapons pods.

From Gridly he moves slowly northeast, taking his time, mapping the flying radar arrays. They are drone aircraft, he knows, ultralights under robot control, solar powered so as to stay aloft forever, only having to return to base for servicing every couple months or so. They are in constant microwave communication with computers on the ground, ready to scramble aircraft if anything suspicious pops up. They are so light that radar-homing missiles can't find them to shoot them down, and antiradiation homers would be spotted in time for the arrays to switch off before the missile arrived.

Cowboy is aiming for the wide area between New Kansas City and the Ozarks. People in the Ozarks are friendly, he knows, with a tradition of resistance to the people they call *the laws* that goes back at least to Cole Younger, but the terrain is too restrictive. Cowboy wants a fast run over the flat. The fact that this part of the state is where the privateers have concentrated their defenses is just a pleasant coincidence.

The sensor drones are turning lazy circles in the air as they glide downward on battery power, and Cowboy thinks he sees a pattern building that will allow him to slide into a blind spot that might last until he's fifty miles the other side of the Missouri border. As his panzer slides down the crumbling banks of the Marais de Cygnes and tears across mudbanks and muddy water, the panzer extrudes a directional antenna and spits a coded message to the west, to where Arkady and the Dodger await in Arkady's aircraft, turning its own circles over the plains of eastern Colorado.

The answering signal comes quickly, a strong broadcast to Arkady's people on the Kansas-Missouri border. There are other panzerboys out there, standing ready by their vehicles, waiting for the word . . . and when they receive it their own panzers will hit the plains, moving swiftly and then stopping, tearing through fields in zigzag patterns, sending dust signatures aloft, tracking radar and infra-red patterns across the computer displays of the privateers. The laws will have to expend a lot of effort tracking them down and apprehending them. And when found the decoy panzerboys will surrender meekly enough—since they carry no contraband and will only be fined for the amount of bobwire they

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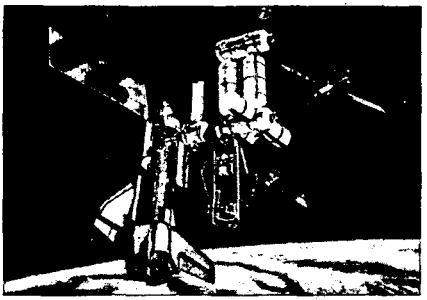

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flattened during their runs, and possibly do a little time for reckless endangerment. Arkady will cover the fines and legal fees, as well as their generous salaries. If the worst happens their widows and orphans will have the benefit of insurance. It's well-paid work, and a training ground for ambitious panzerboys who want to run the Line.

But after the signal to the other panzerboys comes the Dodger's voice, dry as the Portales plains. "Arkady Mikhailovich would appreciate a little more information, here, Cowboy," he says. "He wants to know why you didn't report earlier."

"They can trace a message these days, Dodger."

The Dodger is silent for a while, getting a lecture from Arkady no doubt, and when his voice returns it is less good-humored. "A squirt transmission via microwave is next to untraceable," he says. "Arkady says you should have reported when you got past the Kansas defenses."

"Sorry," Cowboy says cheerfully. "But I'm damn close to the Missouri line right now and I would just as soon not have to keep up this conversation while I'm trying to work."

There is another pause. "Arkady reminds you that he has a big investment in your panzer, and he wants to be kept informed of what his investment is doing."

"I aim to give him a nice return on his money," Cowboy says. "I don't plan to waste time with a lot of chatter. I've got a window right now, and I'm taking it. See you." And he switches off, making a note to send Arkady some worry beads from the East when he gets there.

The panzer climbs out of the Marais de Cygnes and increases its speed as it begins its run east. The drumming of corn on the bow increases to a steady hammer. Engine gauges are running orange to red. Green lights everywhere else. Steel guitars sing like angels in the mind and Missouri wails a siren song in accompaniment. Delivering the mail is a splendid thing.

The decoy panzerboys are causing a stir and more radar arrays are being turned on, the ones unused so far in the hope their sudden appearance will catch the smugglers by surprise. Cowboy's blind spot is still a blank. He throws caution to the wind and decides to red out the engines. A half-heard message from his body records he is being punched back in his seat, but he's got other things to think about. The panzer is airborne half the time, tearing up the low hills and flying over the crests, throwing corn and scattering wire, its voice a madwoman's wail. Neurons flicker in Cowboy's mind, pulsing their messages to the crystal, keeping the craft stable as it punches up and down. The control surfaces ride the wire-edge of stability, skating the brink. Cowboy knows there will be deep bruises under his restraining straps, even through the padding.

He crosses the Missouri Line between Louisburg and the rusting mon-

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ument to the Marais de Cygnes Massacre. Parched Missouri is waiting for rain and his dust plume is towering a couple of hundred yards but there's no one to see it. The control surfaces are getting accustomed to the buffeting they're taking and the movement is easier.

And then radar pulses from directly above as a new sensor plane is switched into the array. Cowboy's blind spot has become pistol-hot and the dust signature must look like a flaming arrow in the night. Cowboy is shutting systems down from red to orange to amber and trying to make himself smaller, but the radar is right overhead and there's no way to get out of its way. He slows down the lunging panzer and dives over the banks of the South Grand. His water plume is a lot lower than the dust and he wonders if he's successfully evaded, but then other airborne arrays begin to flick into existence in the nearby sky and he knows what's going to happen.

His own radar shows a fishing rowboat frozen in place on the still water and the panzer lunges for the bank, avoiding it. He cools the engines from amber to green—best to save fuel for later. He decides it's time to listen to what the laws have to say and switches on his police band antenna. The privateers' transmissions are coded but the state cops' are not, and with a part of his expanded mind he listens to their calls of frustration as they try, with four-wheel vehicles, to follow the panzerboys as they whip their way across country. Occasionally a privateer controller comes on the air to give them advice. Cowboy has the impression that the state laws are somewhat reluctant to cooperate with freelance mercenary enforcement, something he more or less suspected.

The radars seem to be circling more randomly now, as if they've lost him at least part of the time. The panzer is in Johnson County before Cowboy detects a radar boring toward him from the east, low enough to be attached to an aircraft. He triggers the explosive bolts that release the shrouds covering his weapons pods; the panzer will be less aerodynamic now and require careful watching at speed. Cowboy cycles his engine displays from green to blue and makes a wide swing to the south, hoping to avoid the craft, and for a moment it seems to be working; the aircraft continues on to the north, but then suddenly it jinks, swooping directly for the panzer.

Cowboy feels a wave of alcohol leaping through his heart as the engine displays rocket up to red, the panzer shuddering as it spits flame. For a moment it tries to climb aloft, the wind humming through the weapons pods like the southeast trades through a windjammer's rigging, but gravity pulls hard on its vector and the panzer crashes down onto its cushion. As the indicators max out Cowboy looses a radar decoy missile and kicks the panzer into a shuddering left turn, its starboard side scraping soil. The missile continues on a straight course, its wide wings extended,

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keeping low to the ground. It has no radar-absorbent paint and so its signature should look about the size of an absorbent panzer; and its exhaust should attract anyone looking at infra-red.

Cowboy kicks on the afterburners and makes tracks for the Father of Waters. Behind him he can see flashes in the night sky as the aircraft fires off its weaponry at his decoy. He hopes there are no citizens below; those rockets look really unpleasant.

There are no explosions he can see; the privateer aircraft continues its course for a while, slowing, and Cowboy slows, too, minimizing his infra-red signal now that he's got a dozen miles separating him from the craft. Strong radar pulses are still coming from right overhead. Police radio tells Cowboy that two of his decoys have been caught, which means more resources available for chasing him. The privateer is beginning to circle in his direction, and Cowboy sees the strange silhouettes of a metal forest on the horizon and he changes course again and dives among them.

It's a forest of rectennas miles wide, receiving the low-energy microwave coming down from a solar power satellite high above, a burning fixed star in the heavens that symbolizes the prostrate earth's dependence on the Orbital power. Cowboy threads his way neatly through the metal web on nightvision alone. He's probably confused any signal the enemy radars are getting but the privateer craft is still getting closer. The panzer emerges into a clearing where a metal maintenance shack rusts on its slab of concrete, and in that brief moment Cowboy fires a chaff rocket straight up and dives among the aluminum trees again.

The chaff rocket climbs three miles and bursts, and suddenly Cowboy's gear is picking up radar signals and low-energy microwave bouncing from everywhere. The chaff, wafting gently down from altitude, is composed of aluminum strips, one out of ten of which are implanted with a minichip and a tiny power source that records and then plays back any radio signal it receives. On Cowboy's radar displays it looks as if a vast radio Christmas tree has suddenly bloomed above the prairie. The people controlling the power grid are probably going crazy. Cowboy finishes threading his way through the rectenna forest and kicks in the afterburners again. The aircraft's signal is lost in all the chaff and he figures it's time to run. His computer maps show a riverbed ahead. It seems a good time to go fishing.

The riverbed is dry and winding but it leaves the enemy craft far behind. There's a lot of coded radio traffic flying around, each message echoed by the chaff as it slowly flutters down, but there's a frantic quality to it and there's one message from the privateers that requests assistance from the state cops, broadcast in the clear and repeated with endless, echoing lunatic efficiency by the chaff. Cowboy grins and climbs out of the riverbed and runs northeast.

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It looks as if the chase craft are all down and fueling because he's well across the Missouri north of Columbia before he runs into any more trouble. He is expecting it, cooling his engines on green and utilizing cover, because the police radios are telling him another two of his decoy panzerboys have been taken and the rest driven to ground, and that means more hunters free. Suddenly there's radar pulsing from directly overhead again and another radar dopplering in from the northwestern horizon, as if it's just hopped up from somebody's airfield. Cowboy slows and turns away: no good. He looks for a piece of extensive woods and can't find one, and suddenly there's another radar signature arching in fast from the south. He fires another chaff rocket and alters course once again. The two seem confused for a moment by the chaff, but then the southern one corrects its course, followed by the northern craft. The southern craft has probably spotted him on infra-red and is vectoring the other one in.

Targeting displays flash like scarlet madness in the interior of Cowboy's mind. A snarl from his throat echoes the amplified roar of the combustion chambers and the panzer gouges earth as it spins right, toward the oncoming southern radar source. Cowboy turns his own radar off to discourage homing missiles and navigates on his visual sensors alone, his mind making lightning decisions, neurotransmitters clattering against his headswitches like hail, the interface encompassing the whole flashing universe, the panzer and its systems, the corn thundering under the armored skirts, the blithering chaff, the two hostile privateers burning out of the night. His craft threatens to leave the earth; its bones moan with stresses and the weapons pods shriek in the wind. The air is full of dismembered corn. Two fences are flattened and the tall silhouette of a silo spears the blackness, the peculiarities of the panzer's optics making it seem to curl in toward him, threatening. He can see the enemy now, a conventional helicopter speeding toward him at tree level, its minigun flashing. He fires an antiradiation-homer right between the privateer eyes just as the Chobham over his head begins to ring to the sound of cannonfire. Sparks flood his exterior displays and he flinches as he loses an eye.

Then he is past, and through the armor and the bucketing of the vehicle he can hear the roar of the chopper as its blades flog the sky. The antiradiation homer missed: too much chaff confusing things, or the copter got its radars off in time. But now there's another sound, the tone of a heat-seeker asking its permission to fly, and Cowboy triggers the bird and hauls the panzer to the left, feeling as from a dim distance the lurch as it slaloms over a hillcrest in a spray of corndust.

The chopper dies in a flame of blazing glory, scoring the field in an eruption of fuel and weaponry. The silo stands in rearview like a tomb-

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stone, flickering red. There is mad chatter on the radio, a scrambled microwave screaming, still recognizably human, amplified and echoed to the point of yammering lunacy by the falling chaff. Cowboy concludes that the privateer coming from the northwest has just seen what happened to his comrade. The panzer is trying to turn on a reverse camber, skidding on a bed of cornsilk as gravity and momentum try to turn it over. Cowboy can feel the spin of the gyros in his head, trembling as the hovercraft rides the brink.

The privateer craft wails overhead with a banshee shriek and Cowboy can see its underbody reflecting the red flickering of its comrade's pyre. A coleopter, turbines throbbing inside the rotating shrouds that top the stubby wingtips. It's a light jet fighter craft that can take off vertically and hover, combining the best qualities of a subsonic pursuit craft and helicopter, at a considerable expense in fuel consumption. Cowboy hopes to find a window to launch another missile but the blazing fuel just over the rise is confusing his sensors and the coleopter suddenly banks into a swift turn, scattering thermite decoys that burn like miniature parachute suns, and the window that fluttered open for a second is gone. The panzer hurls itself above the rise again and skates along the edge of the red glare cast off by the scattered chopper, heading for the spire of silo in the distance.

Plans flicker through Cowboy's liquid-crystal switches with the fluid electric grace of heat lightning. The smartest thing for the privateer to do is to keep the panzer in sight and guide others in without risking itself. In that case Cowboy will have to go after the coleopter, but on the other hand radar is still hopelessly confused and the coleopter can't tell the infrared signature of the panzer from that of the wreck, and this is Cowboy's chance to fly. He decides to cycle up to red and run for the safety of Egypt on the other side of the Mississippi.

But the privateer pilot must have eyes like singularities, devouring worlds, or there's some remarkably fine equipment on the 'opter—maybe one of those sound detectors?—because the coleopter comes out of its bank and heads right for the panzer's exhaust. No error. Cowboy cuts in the afterburners and hopes there's some cover just over the horizon. His antiradiation homers won't work among the chaff, and neither will his radar-directed missiles. He can't get a good infra-red signature from the coleopter's bow and so the heat-seekers won't be lucky, either.

The terrain is irregular and suddenly the corn is replaced by hemp, high as an elephant's eye and bursting with resin. That will make the ground less slick than the corn, maneuvers less critical. The enemy pilot is burning right for him in apparent anger over what happened to his friend, and Cowboy knows he can use that anger as an aikido master uses his opponent's kinetic energy, against him—but first the engines

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have to max red, afterburners bleeding alcohol fire, and the panzer has to take some punishment.

Cowboy is airborne as he floats across the crest of a rise, and a tug on the controls slews the skimming panzer to starboard just as the coleopter triggers a weapons pod and half a dozen shapecharge rockets set the hemp ablaze. There is pounding on the Chobham, and a blaze of red lights on Cowboy's displays tell him that one of his own weapons pods has been penetrated by a jugsized minigun round that's wiped out a couple hundred K of advanced electronics. The sensors aiming his own minigun are shot away just before he decides to trigger some rounds. The neurotransmitters clattering against Cowboy's braincrystal are smoking with the sour tang of adrenaline, and the coleopter pilot seems to have tempered anger with caution because he's matching speed without overshooting, and so Cowboy has no choice but to rocket on across the good earth of Missouri, building momentum, jinking left and right, clawing against the hemp for the leverage that will send his enemy cartwheeling to the mat. The minigun hammers, hammers. The panzer's sensors flare and die.

And then Cowboy opens new floodgates of alcohol and his engines cry in anguish as he reverses them. Even through its chemical slumber his body wails as the straps dig in. Half the comp displays are frozen in utter shock. The coleopter staggers as it tries to maintain its position, but it's too close to the earth to stall in hopes of losing momentum and its flaps are already fully deployed. The pilot knows what's going to happen and is loosing thermite flares even before his half-controlled and thoroughly doomed craft whispers overhead and the tone sounds on Cowboy's aural crystal. Cowboy's missiles leap from the remaining pod and the port turbine explodes with red energy and the coleopter whimpers in metallic pain and corkscrews in.

The panzer flees across the redscored night. Egypt is near but so is the dawn. Staggering systems reawaken; Cowboy gentles the engines and manages to keep them alive. Time to find a place to hide and await the next night.

Cowboy gets across another fifty miles of country before dawn and the sense of an approaching wave of enemy rein him in. There are thousands of abandoned farms and barns here, old privately-owned places that couldn't compete with the Orbital-controlled agriplexes and their robot farms, and Cowboy knows of quite a few where the old buildings, next to the robot-farmed cornfields, remain empty.

A new taste comes through the facemask as the body is reawakened. Carefully, with gentle precision, he shoulders aside the heavy double doors and guides the panzer into a concrete-walled barn. It is one of the long, narrow type, rectangular in cross-section, designed to store baled

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hay in the days before the Orbitals built big warehouses for their produce, one for every hundred farms. He remembers, just before he shuts off the engines, that he forgot to send Arkady a message.

Well. Let him watch the news and find out that way. Cowboy will just tell him he couldn't get a signal through all the chaff.

With a touch of regret Cowboy unjacks, and waves of delayed pain flame into his mind as the displays slip into night. His body is bruised and aching and his clothes are dark with sweat. His mouth salivates for a painkiller. He takes the carbine from its scabbard and pops the hatch.

The barn smells like must and unburnt hydrocarbons. He can hear the scuttle of rats. Cowboy turns the Kikuyu eyes to infra-red and scans the barn. With his hardwired nerves he can fire the carbine with perfect accuracy at anything the eyes can see.

And the eyes can see two people, huddled under some ancient straw in a concrete corner. Cowboy pauses for a moment, straining to find the signature of weapons, and then, keeping the carbine in his hand, he reaches below for a tradepack.

The cooling engines give out metallic crackles and the doorframe, behind, is silvered with approaching dawn. Cowboy drags himself out of the hatch and climbs down the long frontal slope of armor, his boots sliding in the sticky hemp resin.

"Where you folks from?" he asks.

"New York. Buffalo." The voice is young and scared. Cowboy nears them and sees a pair of ragged kids of sixteen or so, a boy and a girl, the both of them huddled in a single sleeping bag. A pair of threadbare rucksacks sit in a forlorn heap near them.

"Heading west?" Cowboy asks.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm going east. Bet you're tired of eating roasting ears," Cowboy says. He lofts the tradepack and it thumps on concrete next to the pair. They flinch at the sound. "There's some real food in there, freeze-dried and canned. Some good whiskey and cigarets. And a check post-dated to next Monday, for five thousand dollars."

There is silence, broken only by the sound of breathing and the scuttle of rats.

"In case you don't get the picture," Cowboy says, "the check will only be good if I finish my run."

The two look at each other for a moment, then at Cowboy. "You don't have to pay us," the boy says quietly. "We wouldn't—we're from the East, you know. We know what you're doing. I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for some bootleg antibiotics."

"Yeah. Well. Just consider the money a goodwill gesture," Cowboy

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says, and turns away to place some remote sensors outside and close the barn doors.

Time for a rest.

Back in the panzer the cabin smells of sweat and adrenaline. Cowboy takes off the g-suit and removes the electrodes, then gives himself a sponge bath from one of his jerricans. He eats some prepared food that's heavy on protein, drinks something heavy on replacement electrolytes and rolls into the little bunk.

The adrenaline still has him pumped up and all he can see behind his closed lids is a burning afterimage of maps and displays and engine grids climbing toward orange, exploding fuel, rockets flaming through the night with pyrotechnic abandon. And, somewhere behind the neon throbbing visions, a little claw of resentment.

It has always been enough to run the Alley, to blend his soul with throbbing turbopumps and wailing afterburners, bringing the mail from one free zone to another. There was an ethic in it, clean and pure. It was enough to be a free jock on a free road, doing battle with those who would restrict him, keep him bound to the earth as if he were nothing more than a mudboy. It hadn't mattered what he was carrying. It was enough to know that, whatever the state of the rest of the country, the blue sky over his own head was the air of freedom.

But of late there has been a suspicion that adherence to the ethic may not be enough. He knows that while it is one thing to be a warrior noble and true, it is another to be a dupe.

Suppose you are an Orbital manufacturer, interested in keeping control of your markets on the planet. You've won all the political control that is necessary, and you've kept prices high by controlling supply. But still, you're smart enough to know that where there is scarcity, black markets will develop. Most of the stuff—the drugs and a lot of the hardware, anyway, if not the special alloys—can still be made earthside, but more expensively.

If you know that the black market will develop anyway, why not develop it yourself? You can keep the thirdmen supplied with a trickle of product, enough to make themselves rich. You can afford enough muscle to keep the competition down, and in the meantime you are not only dominating the legitimate market, you are controlling supply in the underground as well. You can create and supply a demand in two separate markets, the legitimate and illegitimate.

Where does Arkady get his cargo? The question is beginning to have an important sound to it.

But now the adrenaline has burned out of Cowboy's body and his body aches are dragging him down. He knows he won't find any answers in a deserted barn in Missouri and his thoughts have become muddled. It's

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time to slip under the narrow wool trade blanket, marked with the line that means its value had once been equated with a beaver pelt, and prepare his mind and body for the last lunge across the Alley.

It's late afternoon before he rises, and the kids are gone. The post-dated check flutters from one of the panzer's aerials. Cowboy plucks it from its spike and looks at it for a while and wonders about ethics and debts, symbols and actions, and the thing that in olden times they called honor. Somewhere near here, he knows, there is another piece of free and lucid sky.

He does his chores, replacing the sensors that were blown away by the privateers, scraping off most of the hemp resin along with the corn and wheat chaff that's adhered to it, spraying antiradiation paint over the dings in the Chobham. The minigun has really given the craft a working over and it's lucky more systems weren't breached. He doesn't have many weapons left but then there's only a few miles to the Big Muddy.

He sits in his padded couch and puts a stud in his head and listens to his sensors for a few minutes. Such traffic as they pick up seems normal. But then, as the day wanes, there's a lot of talk to and from some airport tower in the neighborhood. The place must be only a few miles away because he can hear each syllable clearly. The chatter is uncoded and seems innocuous, but a lot of the aircraft seem to have the same prefixes. Cowboy begins to find this interesting.

Suppose you were a privateer commander angry over a couple of losses the previous night. Suppose you'd worked out that the panzer you were chasing was beaten up, possibly disabled, and in any case couldn't have made it over the Mississippi before dawn. Suppose you wanted to get some revenge for your friends who had been burned beyond recognition in a Missouri cornfield the previous night.

You'd concentrate your forces on the nearest airfield to where the panzer waits for nightfall, and you'd have some picket planes moved over the area with the best in detection technology, and the rest would be sitting on the runway apron ready to vector in on the panzer once it's spotted to turn it into a lightly armored grease spot in some scorched little piece of prairie. That's what you'd do.

Cowboy puts a map on the display and finds something called the Philadelphia Community Airport only four miles away. It's far too small to have this kind of traffic coming in and out, and it's just over a ridge and through some woods. Cowboy begins to smile.

By dusk he's strapped in his couch and has the engines sweetly warming. He reverses them gently and backs out of the barn, then moves at low speed across some half-rusted bobwire and along the length of the ridge, not quite daring to put his radar signature, however briefly, on top. There's a dirt farm road here and he finds it, threads along through

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a grove of pine that carries with it a memory of the smell and the sound of sweet breezes, the soft pillow of needles underfoot. He leaves the road and moves through a damp bottom where the sound of his engines is muffled by leaves and moss. Then, moving in a roundabout track, he climbs a woody plateau, nudging young pine, until his expanded vision sees a little radar tower silhouetted against the sunset.

They are all there, a dozen or more warcraft squatting like evil metal cicadas, sunset-flames reflecting off their polished bodies, the barrels of their guns, the weapons in their pods. The airships have slogans and cartoons painted on their noses, evocative of swift mechanical violence, warrior machismo, or the trust of the gambler in the instrument of his passion: Death from Above, PanzerBlaster, Sweet Judy Snakeyes, the Ace of Spades. There are a few techs walking about on the apron, tools in their hands. Cowboy permits himself a moment of adrenaline triumph before he cuts loose.

As the panzer trembles on the verge of the clearing Cowboy has a brief image of a runner poised on splayed fingertips, his feet in the blocks, his flesh molding the sinew in which the coiled energy waits, a faultless perfection, for the end of stillness. He unleashes the power and a covey of quail burst like scattershot from before the panzer's oncoming bow. The engines cycle from murmur to thunder to shriek, and Cowboy can see the techs stand for a frozen moment of horror as the panzer lunges from the trees, mashing down a fence as if the panzer were an armored cyclone, a piece of belching mechanical vengeance straight from the Inferno, and then the men in coveralls scatter, crying warning.

Too late. The armored panzer is traveling over a hundred across the flat ground before it brushes aside the first helicopter. The panzer is heavier by far and the Ace of Spades folds like the hollow deathwhite abandoned skin of an insect. Cowboy's popped up his minigun turret from beneath its armored hatch and has it firing behind him into the wreckage, sparking off the fuel. Sweet Judy Snakeyes crumbles in front of the armored skirts, then a coleopter named Death from Above, then another called the Hanging Judge. Through one of his sensors he catches a glimpse of pilots tumbling out of the airport lounge, coffee cups still in their hands, eyes and mouths wide as they watch the conflagration. Then burning fuel begins to set off ammunition and the pilots scatter like the quail for cover.

Steel and flaming aluminum alloy storm on the Chobham. In the end Cowboy counts fourteen wrecks on the runway verge. He mashes down some more fence and follows the Salt River to the Father of Waters, crossing between Locks 21 and 22, unmolested by things that fly in the night. Though the sun is long gone, even from deep in Illinois he can

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still see the western horizon glowing red. He suspects he will hear no more of privateers.

The Illinois defenses face north against a breed of blond, apple-cheeked panzerboys who run butter and cheese across the Line from Wisconsin, and Cowboy expects no trouble. As he gentles the hovercraft up to a fueling barge on the Illinois River, Cowboy decides it's time to face the music and extrudes a directional microwave antenna and points it at the western horizon.

"Pony Express here," he says. "Sorry to be a little late with the report, but I had an antenna shot away." There is a kind of angry growl of static in reply, B's and P's like magnum rounds, and Cowboy grins as he turns down the volume and talks right over the voice.

"I'm not picking you up very well, but that's okay," he says. "I'm in Illinois right now, and I thought I'd mention that I've just about run out of Alley and that in the last twenty-four hours I've accounted for sixteen aircraft belonging to those undercapitalized bastards. You can read it in the papers tomorrow. Save me some copies for my scrapbook."

The buzzing sound in his ears is miraculously stilled, and Cowboy grins again. "Adios," he says, and he turns off the radio and sits in sweet and blissful silence while he watches the fuel gauges climbing upward toward where he floats in the sky, a distant speck in the eyes of the other panzerboys, so high in the steely pure azure that to the mudboys and dirtgirls of Earth he is invisible, an icon of liberation. He has not simply run the Alley, he has beaten it, smashed the new instrument of oppression and left it a mass of half-melted girders and blackened plexiglass amid a pool of flaming fuel and skyrocketing ammunition.

Kentucky is a state that figures to make more money from free-spending thirdmen and panzerboys than they can from taxing what they do, and it's an easy ride across Egypt to the Ohio. Cowboy follows some nameless little creek up into the free state until it comes to a farm road, and then he makes another radio call explaining where he is.

What he's doing is legal in Kentucky but the state does not appreciate large potentials for sudden violence within its borders, so all the stuff in the weapons pods is very much against the law. Cowboy has to wait up his little farm road for a crew to come along and remove them from the vehicle, and while he waits he takes the torn post-dated check from his pocket and looks at it for a long while. By the time a truck full of mudboys comes bouncing along the corrugated road he's got things figured out.

It matters, he decides. It matters where the chloramphenildorphin is coming from and it matters who bankrolls Arkady. In Cowboy's hand is something that represents an obscure, indefinable debt to some anony-

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mous pair of Alley rats, a debt as hard and cutting as Solingen steel, and the obligation is simply to find out.

It is no longer enough to be the best. Somehow, as well, it matters to be wise. To know on whose behalf he wields the sword.

And if he discovers the worst? That the thirdmen are masks worn by the Orbital power?

Then another debt is called. The interest alone is staggering, will take years to pay. But he's called himself a citizen of the free and immaculate sky too long to accept the notion that his world of air has bars on it.

There is a polite knock on the hatch, and he puts the check back in his pocket. The mudboys are telling him it's time to move. Somewhere in his mind, a steel guitar is singing. . . . ●

SONNET: TO AN ALIEN LOVER

i like my body when it is with your
body. we move together with strange grace
for two so different, two whose limbs, so sure
and smooth in darkness, by day articulate
in different ways;
by day we are again
of separate races.
we are lovers; but
seen together we are mere aliens
and nothing of resemblance bear each other;
and nothing stranger could be thought of us
than that so strange a pair could share a bed. . . .

but nature in her wisest randomness
equipped us both remarkably to fit
each other, moving sure and graceful with
no awkwardness as we most softly kiss.

—Thomas Kearney

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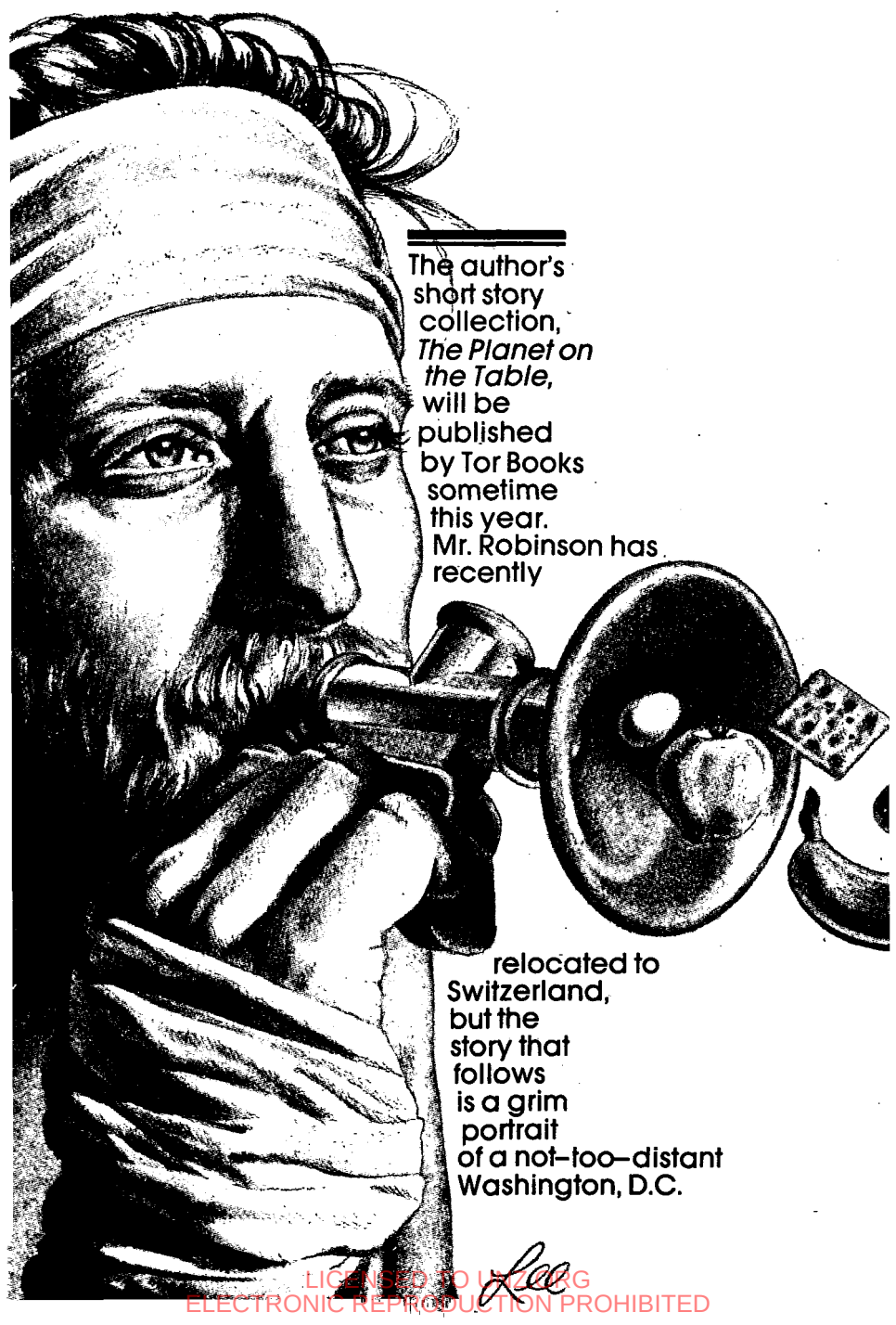

The author's short story collection, *The Planet on the Table*, will be published by Tor Books sometime this year. Mr. Robinson has recently relocated to Switzerland, but the story that follows is a grim portrait of a not-too-distant Washington, D.C.

Lee

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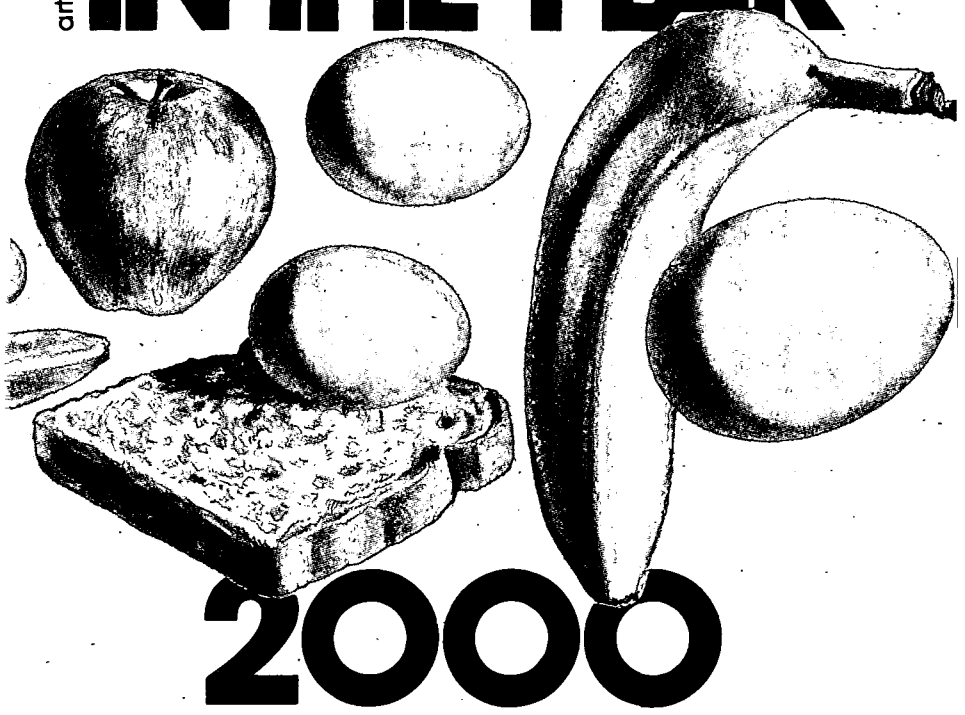
by Kim Stanley Robinson

DOWN AND OUT IN THE YEAR 2000

art: Terry Lee



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It was going to be hot again. Summer in Washington, D.C.—Leroy Robinson woke and rolled on his mattress, broke into a sweat. That kind of a day. He got up and kneeled over the other mattress in the small room. Debra shifted as he shaded her from the sun angling in the open window. The corners of her mouth were caked white and her forehead was still hot and dry, but her breathing was regular and she appeared to be sleeping well. Quietly Leroy slipped on his jeans and walked down the hall to the bathroom. Locked. He waited; Ramon came out wet and groggy. "Morning, Robbie." Into the bathroom, where he hung his pants on the hook and did his morning ritual. One bloodshot eye, staring back at him from the splinter of mirror still in the frame. The dirt around the toilet base. The shower curtain blotched with black algae, as if it had a fatal disease. That kind of morning.

Out of the shower he dried off with his jeans and started to sweat again. Back in his room Debra was still sleeping. Worried, he watched her for a while, then filled his pockets and went into the hall to put on sneakers and tank-top. Debra slept light these days, and the strangest things would rouse her. He jogged down the four flights of stairs to the street, and sweating freely stepped out into the steamy air.

He walked down 16th Street, with its curious alternation of condo fortresses and abandoned buildings, to the Mall. There, big khaki tanks dominated the broad field of dirt and trash and tents and the odd patch of grass. Most of the protesters were still asleep in their scattered tent villages, but there was an active crowd around the Washington Monument, and Leroy walked on over, ignoring the soldiers by the tanks.

The crowd surrounded a slingshot as tall as a man, made of a forked tree branch. Inner tubes formed the sling, and the base was buried in the ground. Excited protesters placed balloons filled with red paint into the sling, and fired them up at the monument. If a balloon hit above the red that already covered the tower, splashing clean white—a rare event, as the monument was pure red up a good third of it—the protesters cheered crazily. Leroy watched them as they danced around the sling after a successful shot. He approached some of the calmer seated spectators.

"Want to buy a joint?"

"How much?"

"Five dollars."

"Too much, man! You must be kidding! How about a dollar?"

Leroy walked on.

"Hey, wait! One joint, then. Five dollars . . . shit."

"Going rate, man."

The protester pushed long blond hair out of his eyes and pulled a five

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from a thick clip of bills. Leroy got the battered Marlboro box from his pocket and took the smallest joint from it. "Here you go. Have fun. Why don't you fire one of them paint bombs at those tanks, huh?"

The kids on the ground laughed. "We will when you get them stoned!"

He walked on. Only five joints left. It took him less than an hour to sell them. That meant thirty dollars, but that was it. Nothing left to sell. As he left the Mall he looked back at the monument; under its wash of paint it looked like a bone sticking out of raw flesh.

Anxious about coming to the end of his supply, Leroy hoofed it up to Dupon Circle and sat on the perimeter bench in the shade of one of the big trees, footsore and hot. In the muggy air it was hard to catch his breath. He ran the water from the drinking fountain over his hands until someone got in line for a drink. He crossed the circle, giving a wide berth to a bunch of lawyers in long-sleeved shirts and loosened ties, lunching on wine and cheese under the watchful eye of their bodyguard. On the other side of the park Delmont Briggs sat by his cup, almost asleep, his sign propped on his lap. The wasted man. Delmont's sign—and a little side business—provided him with just enough money to get by on the street. The sign, a battered square of cardboard, said PLEASE HELP—HUNGRY. People still looked through Delmont like he wasn't there, but every once in a while it got to somebody. Leroy shook his head distastefully at the idea.

"Delmont, you know any weed I can buy? I need a finger baggie for twenty."

"Not so easy to do, Robbie." Delmont hemmed and hawed and they dickered for a while, then he sent Leroy over to Jim Johnson, who made the sale under a cheery exchange of the day's news, over by the chess tables. After that Leroy bought a pack of cigarettes in a liquor store, and went up to the little triangular park between 17th, S, and New Hampshire, where no police or strangers ever came. They called it Fish Park for the incongruous cement whale sitting by one of the trash cans. He sat down on the long broken bench, among his acquaintances who were hanging out there, and fended them off while he carefully emptied the Marlboros, cut some tobacco into the weed, and refilled the cigarette papers with the new mix. With their ends twisted he had a dozen more joints. They smoked one and he sold two more for a dollar each before he got out of the park.

But he was still anxious, and since it was the hottest part of the day and few people were about, he decided to visit his plants. He knew it would be at least a week till harvest, but he wanted to see them. Anyway it was about watering day.

East between 16th and 15th he hit no-man's land. The mixed neigh-

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borhood of fortress apartments and burned-out hulks gave way to a block or two of entirely abandoned buildings. Here the police had been at work, and looters had finished the job. The buildings were battered and burnt out, their ground floors blasted wide open, some of them collapsed entirely, into heaps of rubble. No one walked the broken sidewalk, sirens a few blocks off, and the distant hum of traffic, were the only signs that the whole city wasn't just like this. Little jumps in the corner of his eye were no more than that; nothing there when he looked directly. The first time, Leroy had found walking down the abandoned street nerve-racking; now he was reassured by the silence, the stillness, the no-man's land smell of torn asphalt and wet charcoal, the wavering streetscape empty under a sour milk sky.

His first building was a corner brownstone, blackened on the street sides, all its windows and doors gone, but otherwise sound. He walked past it without stopping, turned and surveyed the neighborhood. No movement anywhere. He stepped up the steps and through the doorway, being careful to make no footprints in the mud behind the doorjamb. Another glance outside, then up the broken stairs to the second floor. The second floor was a jumble of beams and busted furniture, and Leroy waited a minute to let his sight adjust to the gloom. The staircase to the third floor had collapsed, which was the reason he had chosen this building: no easy way up. But he had a route worked out, and with a leap he grabbed a beam hanging from the stairwell and hoisted himself onto it. Some crawling up the beam and he could swing onto the third floor, and from there a careful walk up gapped stairs brought him to the fourth floor.

The room surrounding the stairwell was dim, and he had jammed the door to the next room, so that he had to crawl through a hole in the wall to get through. Then he was there.

Sweating profusely, he blinked in the sudden sunlight, and stepped to his plants, all lined out in plastic pots on the far wall. Eleven medium-sized female marijuana plants, their splayed green leaves drooping for lack of water. He took the rain funnel from one of the gallon jugs and watered the plants. The buds were just longer than his thumbnail; if he could wait another week or two at least, they would be the size of his thumb or more, and worth fifty bucks apiece. He twisted off some water leaves and put them in a baggie.

He found a patch of shade and sat with the plants for a while, watched them soak up the water. Wonderful green they had, lighter than most leaves in D.C. Little red threads in the buds. The white sky lowered over the big break in the roof, huffing little gasps of muggy air onto them all.

* * *

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His next spot was several blocks north, on the roof of a burned-out hulk that had no interior floors left. Access was by way of a tree growing next to the wall. Climbing it was a challenge, but he had a route here he took, and he liked the way leaves concealed him even from passersbys directly beneath him once he got above the lowest branches.

The plants here were younger—in fact one had sprouted seeds since he last saw them, and he pulled the plant out and put it in the baggie. After watering them and adjusting the aluminum foil rain funnels on the jug tops, he climbed down the tree and walked back down 14th.

He stopped to rest in Charlie's Baseball Club. Charlie sponsored a city team with the profits from his bar, and old members of the team welcomed Leroy, who hadn't been by in a while. Leroy had played left field and batted fifth a year or two before, until his job with the park service had been cut. After that he had had to pawn his glove and cleats, and he had missed Charlie's minimal membership charge three seasons running, and so he had quit. And then it had been too painful to go by the club, and drink with the guys and look at all the trophies on the wall, a couple of which he had helped to win. But on this day he enjoyed the fan blowing, and the dark, and the fries that Charlie and Fisher shared with him.

Break over, he went to the spot closest to home, where the new plants were struggling through the soil, on the top floor of an empty stone husk on 16th and Caroline. The first floor was a drinking place for derelicts, and old Thunderbird and whiskey bottles, half still in bags, littered the dark room, which smelled of alcohol, urine, and rotting wood. All the better: few people would be foolish enough to enter such an obviously dangerous hole. And the stairs were as near gone as made no difference. He climbed over the holes to the second floor, turned and climbed to the third.

The baby plants were fine, bursting out of the soil and up to the sun, the two leaves covered by four, up into four again. . . . He watered them and headed home.

On the way he stopped at the little market that the Vietnamese family ran, and bought three cans of soup, a box of crackers and some Coke. "Twenty-two oh five tonight, Robbie," old Huang said with a four-toothed grin.

The neighbors were out on the sidewalk, the women sitting on the stoop, the men kicking a soccer ball about aimlessly as they watched Sam sand down an old table, the kids running around. Too hot to stay inside this evening, although it wasn't much better on the street. Leroy helloed through them and walked up the flights of stairs slowly, feeling the day's travels in his feet and legs.

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In his room Debra was awake, and sitting up against her pillows. "I'm hungry, Leroy." She looked hot, bored; he shuddered to think of her day.

"That's a good sign, that means you're feeling better. I've got some soup here should be real good for you." He touched her cheek, smiling.

"It's too hot for soup."

"Yeah, that's true, but we'll let it cool down after it cooks, it'll still taste good." He sat on the floor and turned on the hot plate, poured water from the plastic jug into the pot, opened the can of soup, mixed it in. While they were spooning it out Rochelle Jackson knocked on the door and came in.

"Feeling better, I see." Rochelle had been a nurse before her hospital closed, and Leroy had enlisted her help when Debra fell sick. "We'll have to take your temperature later."

Leroy wolfed down crackers while he watched Rochelle fuss over Debra. Eventually she took a temperature and Leroy walked her out.

"It's still pretty high, Leroy."

"What's she *got?*" he asked, as he always did. Frustration . . .

"I don't know any more than yesterday. Some kind of flu I guess."

"Would a flu hang on this long?"

"Some of them do. Just keep her sleeping and drinking as much as you can, and feed her when she's hungry. —Don't be scared, Leroy."

"I can't help it! I'm afraid she'll get sicker. . . . And there ain't nothing I can do!"

"Yeah, I know. Just keep her fed. You're doing just what I would do."

After cleaning up he left Debra to sleep and went back down to the street, to join the men on the picnic tables and benches in the park tucked into the intersection. This was the "living room" on summer evenings, and all the regulars were there in their usual spots, sitting on tables or bench back. "Hey there, Robbie! What's happening?"

"Not much, not much. No man, don't kick that soccer ball at me, I can't kick no soccer ball tonight."

"You been walking the streets, hey?"

"How else we going to find her to bring her home to you."

"Hey lookee here, Ghost is bringing out his TV."

"It's Tuesday night at the movies, y'all!" Ghost called out as he approached and plunked a little hologram TV and a Honda generator on the picnic table. They laughed and watched Ghost's pale skin glow in the dusk as he hooked the system up.

"Where'd you get this one, Ghost? You been sniffing around the funeral parlors again?"

"You bet I have!" Ghost grinned. "This one's picture is all fucked up, but it still works—I think—"

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He turned the set on and blurry three-dee figures swam into shape in a cube above the box—all in dark shades of blue.

"Man, we *must* have the blues tonight," Ramon remarked. "Look at that!"

"They all look like Ghost," said Leroy.

"Hey, it works, don't it?" Ghost said. Hoots of derision. "And dig the sound! The sound works—"

"Turn it up then."

"It's up all the way."

"What's this?" Leroy laughed. "We got to watch frozen midgets whispering, is that it Ghost? What do midgets say on a cold night?"

"Who the fuck is this?" said Ramon.

Johnnie said, "That be Sam Spade, the greatest computer spy in the world."

"How come he live in that shack, then?" Ramon asked.

"That's to show it's a tough scuffle making it as a computer spy, real tough."

"How come he got four million dollars worth of computers right there in the shack, then?" Ramon asked, and the others commenced giggling, Leroy loudest of all. Johnnie and Ramon could be killer sometimes. A bottle of rum started around, and Steve broke in to bounce the soccer ball on the TV, smashing the blue figures repeatedly.

"Watch out now, Sam about to go plug his brains in to try and find out who he is."

"And then he gonna be told of some stolen *wetware* he got to find."

"I got some wetware myself, only I call it a shirt."

Steve dropped the ball and kicked it against the side of the picnic table, and a few of the watchers joined in a game of pepper. Some men in a stopped van shouted a conversation with the guys on the corner. Those watching the show leaned forward. "Where's he gonna go?" said Ramon. "Hong Kong? Monaco? He gonna take the bus on over to Monaco?"

Johnnie shook his head. "Rio, man. Fucking Rio de Janeiro."

Sure enough, Sam was off to Rio. Ghost choked out an objection: "Johnnie—ha!—you must have seen this one before."

Johnnie shook his head, though he winked at Leroy. "No man, that's just where all the good stolen wetware ends up."

A series of commercials interrupted their fun: deodorant, burglarkillers, cars. The men in the van drove off. Then the show was back, in Rio, and Johnnie said, "He's about to meet a slinky Afro-Asian spy."

When Sam was approached by a beautiful black Asian woman the men couldn't stand it. "Y'all *have* seen this one before!" Ghost cried.

Johnnie sputtered over the bottle, struggled to swallow. "No way! Experience counts, man, that's all."

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"And Johnnie has watched one hell of a lot of Sam Spade," Ramon added.

Leroy said, "I wonder why they're always Afro-Asian."

Steve burst in, laughed. "So they can fuck all of us at once, man!" He dribbled on the image, changed the channel. *"—army command in Los Angeles reports that the rioting killed at least—"* He punched the channel again. "What else we got here—man!—what's *this?"*

"Cyborgs Versus Androids," Johnnie said after a quick glance at the blue shadows. "Lots of fighting."

"Yeah!" Steve exclaimed. Distracted, some of the watchers wandered off. "I'm a cyborg myself, see, I got these false teeth!"

"Shit."

Leroy went for a walk around the block with Ramon, who was feeling good. "Sometimes I feel so good, Robbie! So strong! I walk around this city and I say, the city is falling apart, it can't last much longer like this. And here I am like some kind of animal, you know, living day to day by my wits and figuring out all the little ways to get by . . . you know there are people living up in Rock Creek Park like Indians or something, hunting and fishing and all. And it's just the same in here, you know. The buildings don't make it no different. Just hunting and scrapping to get by, and man I feel so *alive*—" he waved the rum bottle at the sky.

Leroy sighed. "Yeah." Still, Ramon was one of the biggest fences in the area. It was really a steady job. For the rest . . . They finished their walk, and Leroy went back up to his room. Debra was sleeping fitfully. He went to the bathroom, soaked his shirt in the sink, wrung it out. In the room it was stifling, and not even a waft of a breeze came in the window. Lying on his mattress sweating, figuring out how long he could make their money last, it took him a long time to fall asleep.

The next day he returned to Charlie's Baseball Club to see if Charlie could give him any piecework, as he had one or two times in the past. But Charlie only said no, very shortly, and he and everyone else in the bar looked at him oddly, so that Leroy felt uncomfortable enough to leave without a drink. After that he returned to the Mall, where the protesters were facing the troops ranked in front of the Capitol, dancing and jeering and throwing stuff. With all the police out it took him a good part of the afternoon to sell all the joints left, and when he had he walked back up 17th Street feeling tired and worried. Perhaps another purchase from Delmont could string them along a few more days. . . .

At 17th and Q a tall skinny kid ran out into the street and tried to open the door of a car stopped for a red light. But it was a protected car despite its cheap look, and the kid shrieked as the handle shocked him.

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He was still stuck by the hand to it when the car roared off, so that he was launched through the air and rolled over the asphalt. Cars drove on by. A crowd gathered around the bleeding kid. Leroy walked on, his jaw clenched. At least the kid would live. He had seen bodyguards gun thieves down in the street, kill them dead and walk away.

Passing Fish Park he saw a man sitting on a corner bench looking around. The guy was white, young; his hair was blond and short, he wore wire-rimmed glasses, his clothes were casual but new, like the protesters' down on the Mall. He had money. Leroy snarled as the sharp-faced stranger, approached him.

"What you doing here?"

"Sitting!" The man was startled, nervous. "Just sitting in a park!"

"This ain't no *park,* man. This is our front yard. You see any front yard to these apartment buildings here? No. This here is our front yard, and we don't like people just coming into it and sitting down anywhere!"

The man stood and walked away, looked back once, his expression angry and frightened. The other man sitting on the park benches looked at Leroy curiously.

Two days later he was nearly out of money. He walked over to Connecticut Avenue, where his old friend Victor played harmonica for coins, when he couldn't find other work. Today he was there, belting out "Amazing Grace." He cut it off when he saw Leroy. "Robbie! What's happening?"

"Not much. You?"

Victor gestured at his empty hat, on the sidewalk before him. "You see it. Don't even have seed coin for the cap, man."

"So you ain't been getting any gardening work lately?"

"No, no. Not lately. I do all right here, though. People still pay for music, man, some of them. Music's the angle." He looked at Leroy, face twisted up against the sun. They had worked together for the park service, in times past. Every morning through the summers they had gone out and run the truck down the streets, stopping at every tree to hoist each other up in slings. The one hoisted had to stand out from trunk or branches like an acrobat, moving around to cut off every branch below twelve feet, and it took careful handling of the chain saw to avoid chopping into legs and such. Those were good times. But now the park service was gone, and Victor gazed at Leroy with a stoic squint, sitting behind an empty hat.

"Do you ever look up at the trees anymore, Robbie?"

"Not much."

"I do. They're growing wild, man! Growing like fucking weeds! Every

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summer they go like crazy. Pretty soon people are gonna have to drive their cars through the branches. The streets'll be tunnels. And with half the buildings in this area falling down . . . I like the idea that the forest is taking this city back again. Running over it like kudzu, till maybe it just be forest again at last."

That evening Leroy and Debra ate tortillas and refries, purchased with the last of their money. Debra had a restless night, and her temperature stayed high. Rochelle's forehead wrinkled as she watched her.

Leroy decided he would have to harvest a couple of the biggest plants prematurely. He could dry them over the hot plate and be in business by the following day.

The next afternoon he walked east into no-man's land, right at twilight. Big thunderheads loomed to the east, lit by the sun, but it had not rained that day and the muggy heat was like an invisible blanket, choking each breath with moisture. Leroy came to his abandoned building, looked around. Again the complete stillness of an empty city. He recalled Ramon's tales of the people who lived forever in the no-man's land, channeling rain into basement pools, growing vegetables in empty lots, and existing entirely on their own with no need for money. . . .

He entered the building, ascended the stairs, climbed the beam, struggled sweating up to the fourth floor and through the hole into his room.

The plants were gone.

"Wha . . ." He kneeled, feeling like he had been punched in the stomach. The plastic pots were knocked over, and fans of soil lay spread over the old wood flooring.

Sick with anxiety he hurried downstairs and jogged north to his second hideaway. Sweat spilled into his eye and it stung fiercely. He lost his breath and had to walk. Climbing the tree was a struggle.

The second crop was gone too.

Now he was stunned, shocked almost beyond thought. Someone must have followed him. . . . It was nearly dark, and the mottled sky lowered over him, empty but somehow, now, watchful. He descended the tree and ran south again, catching his breath in a sort of sobbing. It was dark by the time he reached 16th and Caroline, and he made his way up the busted stairs using a cigarette for illumination. Once on the fourth floor the lighter revealed broken pots, dirt strewn everywhere, the young plants gone. That small they hadn't been worth anything. Even the aluminum foil rain funnels on his plastic jugs had been ripped up and thrown around.

He sat down, soaking wet with sweat, and leaned back against the scored, moldy wall. Leaned his head back and looked up at the orange-white clouds, lit by the city.

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After a while he stumbled downstairs to the first floor and stood on the filthy concrete, among the shadows and the discarded bottles. He went and picked up a whiskey bottle, sniffed it. Going from bottle to bottle he poured whatever drops remained in them into the whiskey bottle. When he was done he had a finger or so of liquor, which he downed in one long pull. He coughed. Threw the bottle against the wall. Picked up each bottle and threw it against the wall. Then he went outside and sat on the curb, and watched the traffic pass by.

He decided that some of his old teammates from Charlie's Baseball Club must have followed him around and discovered his spots, which would explain why they had looked at him so funny the other day. He went over to check it out immediately. But when he got there he found the place closed, shut down, a big new padlock on the door.

"What happened?" he asked one of the men hanging out on the corner, someone from this year's team.

"They busted Charlie this morning. Got him for selling speed, first thing this morning. Now the club be gone for good, and the team too."

When he got back to the apartment building it was late, after midnight. He went to Rochelle's door and tapped lightly.

"Who is it?"

"Leroy." Rochelle opened the door and looked out. Leroy explained what had happened. "Can I borrow a can of soup for Debra for tonight? I'll get it back to you."

"Okay. But I want one back soon, you hear?"

Back in his room Debra was awake. "Where you been, Leroy?" she asked weakly. "I was worried about you."

He sat down at the hot plate, exhausted.

"I'm hungry."

"That's a good sign. Some cream of mushroom soup, coming right up." He began to cook, feeling dizzy and sick. When Debra finished eating he had to force the remaining soup down him.

Clearly, he realized, someone he knew had ripped him off—one of his neighbors, or a park acquaintance. They must have guessed his source of weed, then followed him as he made his rounds. Someone he knew. One of his friends.

Early the next day he fished a newspaper out of a trashcan and looked through the short column of want ads for dishwashing work and the like. There was a busboy job at the Dupont Hotel and he walked over and asked about it. The man turned him away after a single look: "Sorry,

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man, we looking for people who can walk out into the restaurant, you know." Staring in one of the big silvered windows as he walked up New Hampshire, Leroy saw what the man saw: his hair spiked out everywhere as if he would be a Rasta in five or ten years, his clothes were torn and dirty, his eyes wild. . . . With a deep stab of fear he realized he was too poor to be able to get any job—beyond the point where he could turn it around.

He walked the shimmery black streets, checking phone booths for change. He walked down to M Street and over to 12th, stopping in at all the grills and little Asian restaurants, he went up to Pill Park and tried to get some of his old buddies to front him, he kept looking in pay phones and puzzling through blown scraps of newspaper, desperately hoping that one of them might list a job for him . . . and with each footsore step the fear spiked up in him like the pain lancing up his legs, until it soared into a thoughtless panic. Around noon he got so shaky and sick-feeling he had to stop, and despite his fear he slept flat on his back in Dupont Circle park through the hottest hours of the day.

In the late afternoon he picked it up again, wandering almost aimlessly. He stuck his fingers in every phone booth for blocks around, but other fingers had been there before his. The change boxes of the old farecard machines in the Metro would have yielded more, but with the subway system closed, all those holes into the earth were gated off, and slowly filling with trash. Nothing but big trash pits.

Back at Dupont Circle he tried a pay phone coin return and got a dime. "Yeah," he said aloud; that got him over a dollar. He looked up and saw that a man had stopped to watch him: one of the fucking lawyers, in loosened tie and long-sleeved shirt and slacks and leather shoes, staring at him open-mouthed as his group and its bodguard crossed the street, Leroy held up the coin between thumb and forefinger and glared at the man, trying to impress on him the reality of a dime.

He stopped at the Vietnamese market. "Huang, can I buy some soup from you and pay you tomorrrow?"

The old man shook his head sadly. "I can't do that, Robbie. I do that even once, and—" he wiggled his hands—"the whole house come down. You know that."

"Yeah. Listen, what can I get for—" he pulled the day's change from his pocket and counted it again. "A dollar ten."

Huang shrugged. "Candy bar? No?" He studied Leroy. "Potatoes. Here, two potatoes from the back. Dollar ten."

"I didn't think you had any potatoes."

"Keep them for family, you see. But I sell these to you."

"Thanks, Huang." Leroy took the potatoes and left. There was a trash

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dumpster behind the store; he considered it, opened it, looked in. There was a half-eaten hot dog—but the stench overwhelmed him, and he remembered the poisonous taste of the discarded liquor he had punished himself with. He let the lid of the dumpster slam down and went home.

After the potatoes were boiled and mashed and Debra was fed, he went to the bathroom and showered until someone hammered on the door. Back in his room he still felt hot, and he had trouble catching his breath. Debra rolled from side to side, moaning. Sometimes he was sure she was getting sicker, and at the thought his fear spiked up and through him again, he got so scared he couldn't breathe at all. . . . "I'm hungry, Leroy. Can't I have nothing more to eat?"

"Tomorrow, Deb, tomorrow. We ain't got nothing now."

She fell into an uneasy sleep. Leroy sat on his mattress and stared out the window. White-orange clouds sat overhead, unmoving. He felt a bit dizzy, even feverish, as if he was coming down with whatever Debra had. He remembered how poor he had felt even back when he had had his crops to sell, when each month ended with such a desperate push to make rent. But now . . . He sat and watched the shadowy figure of Debra, the walls, the hotplate and utensils in the corner, the clouds out the window. Nothing changed. It was only an hour or two before dawn when he fell asleep, still sitting against the wall.

Next day he battled fever to seek out potato money from the pay phones and the gutters, but he only had thirty-five cents when he had to quit. He drank as much water as he could hold, slept in the park, and then went to see Victor.

"Vic, let me borrow your harmonica tonight."

Victor's face squinted with distress. "I can't, Robbie. I need it myself. You know—" pleading with him to understand.

"I know," Leroy said, staring off into space. He tried to think. The two friends looked at each other.

"Hey, man, you can use my kazoo."

"What?"

"Yeah, man, I got a good kazoo here, I mean a big metal one with a good buzz to it. It sounds kind of like a harmonica, and it's easier to play it. You just hum notes." Leroy tried it. "No, hum, man. Hum in it."

Leroy tried again, and the kazoo buzzed a long crazy note.

"See? Hum a tune, now."

Leroy hummed around for a bit.

"And then you can practice on my harmonica till you get good on it, and get your own. You ain't going to make anything with a harmonica till you can play it, anyway."

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"But this—" Leroy said, looking at the kazoo.

Victor shrugged. "Worth a try."

Leroy nodded. "Yeah." He clapped Victor on the shoulder, squeezed it. Pointed at Victor's sign, which said *Help a musician!* "You think that helps?"

Victor shrugged. "Yeah."

"Okay. I'm going to get far enough away so's I don't cut into your business."

"You do that. Come back and tell me how you do."

"I will."

So Leroy walked south to Connecticut and M, where the sidwalks were wide and there were lots of banks and restaurants. It was just after sunset, the heat as oppressive as at midday. He had a piece of cardboard taken from a trashcan, and now he tore it straight, took his ballpoint from his pocket and copied Delmont's message. PLEASE HELP—HUNGRY. He had always admired its economy, how it cut right to the main point.

But when he got to what appeared to be a good corner, he couldn't make himself sit down. He stood there, started to leave, returned. He pounded his fist against his thigh, stared about wildly, walked to the curb and sat on it to think things over.

Finally he stepped to a bank pillar mid-sidewalk and leaned back against it. He put the sign against the pillar face-out, and put his old baseball cap upside-down on the ground in front of him. Put his thirty-five cents in it as seed money. He took the kazoo from his pocket, fingered it. "Goddamn it," he said at the sidewalk between clenched teeth. "If you're going to make me live this way, you're going to have to pay for it." And he started to play.

He blew so hard that the kazoo squealed, and his face puffed up till it hurt. "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," blasted into all the passing faces, louder and louder—

When he had blown his fury out he stopped to consider it. He wasn't going to make any money that way. The loose-ties and the career women in dresses and running shoes were staring at him and moving out toward the curb as they passed, huddling closer together in their little flocks as their bodyguards got between him and them. No money in that.

He took a deep breath, started again. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." It really was like singing. And what a song. How you could put your heart into that one, your whole body. Just like singing.

One of the flocks had paused off to the side; they had a red light to

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wait for. It was as he had observed with Delmont: the lawyers looked right through beggars, they didn't want to think about them. He played louder, and one young man glanced over briefly. Sharp face, wire-rims—with a start Leroy recognized the man as the one he had harrassed out of Fish Park a couple days before. The guy wouldn't look at Leroy directly, and so he didn't recognize him back. Maybe he wouldn't have anyway. But he was hearing the kazoo. He turned to his companions, student types gathered to the lawyer flock for the temporary protection of the bodyguard. He said something to them—"I love street music," or something like that—and took a dollar from his pocket. He hurried over and put the folded bill in Leroy's baseball cap, without looking up at Leroy. The *Walk* light came on, they all scurried away. Leroy played on.

That night after feeding Debra her potato, and eating two himself, he washed the pot in the bathroom sink, and then took a can of mushroom soup up to Rochelle, who gave him a big smile.

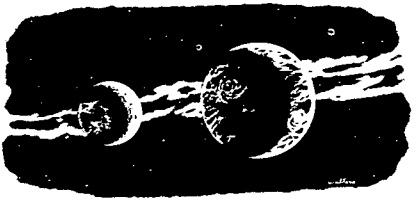
Walking down the stairs he beeped the kazoo, listening to the stairwell's echoes. Ramon passed him and grinned. "Just call you Robinson Caruso," he said, and cackled.

"Yeah."

Leroy returned to his room. He and Debra talked for a while, and then she fell into a half-sleep, and fretted as if in a dream.

"No, that's all right," Leroy said softly. He was sitting on his mattress, leaning back against the wall. The cardboard sign was face down on the floor. The kazoo was in his mouth, and it half buzzed with his words. "We'll be all right. I'll get some seeds from Delmont, and take the pots to new hideouts, better ones." It occurred to him that rent would be due in a couple of weeks; he banished the thought. "Maybe start some gardens in no-man's land. And I'll practice on Vic's harmonica, and buy one from the pawn shop later." He took the kazoo from his mouth, stared at it. "It's strange what will make money."

He kneeled at the window, stuck his head out, hummed through the kazoo. Tune after tune buzzed the still, hot air. From the floor below Ramon stuck his head out his window to object: "Hey, Robinson Caruso! Ha! Ha! Shut the fuck up, I'm trying to sleep!" But Leroy only played quieter. "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean"— ●



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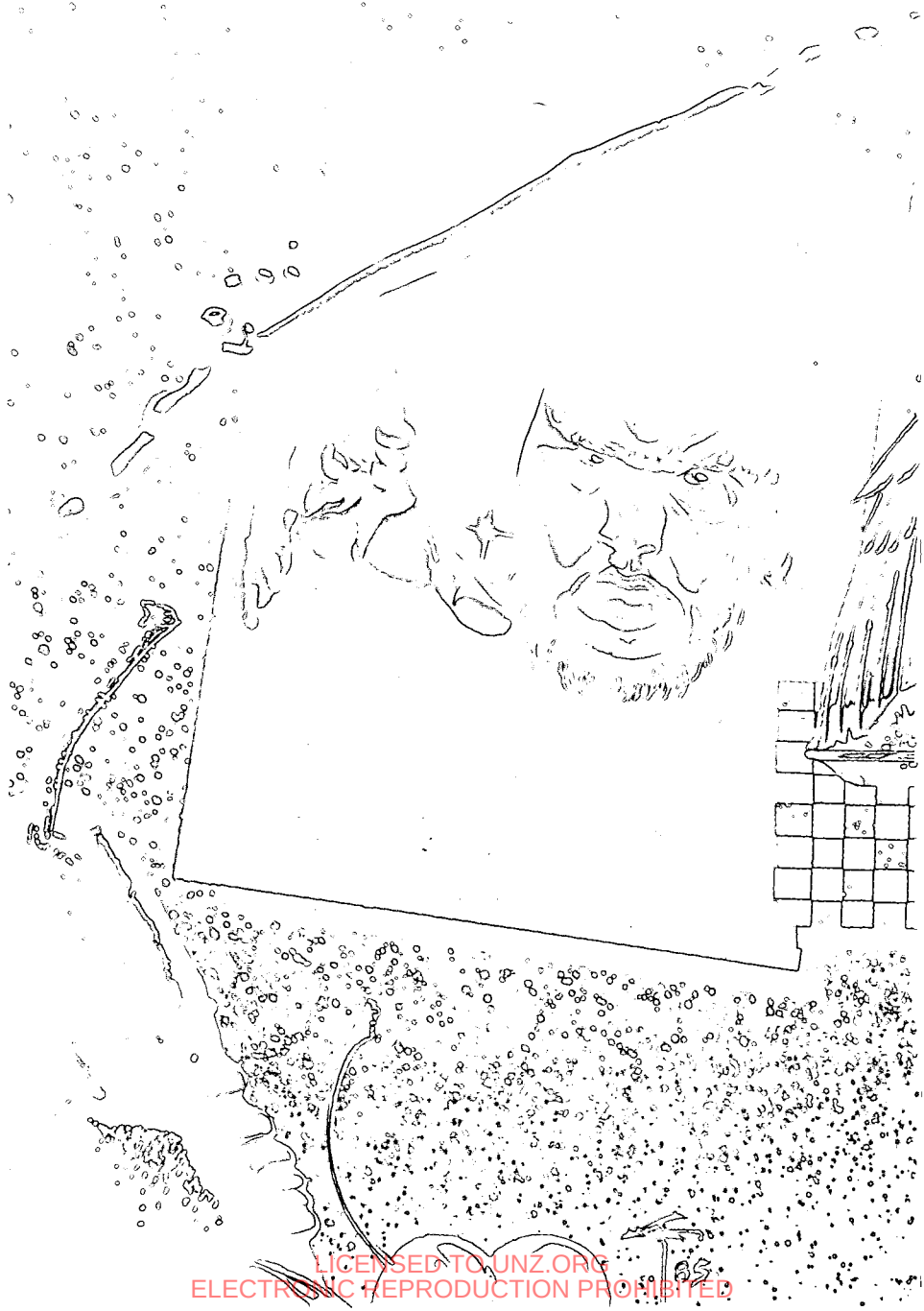

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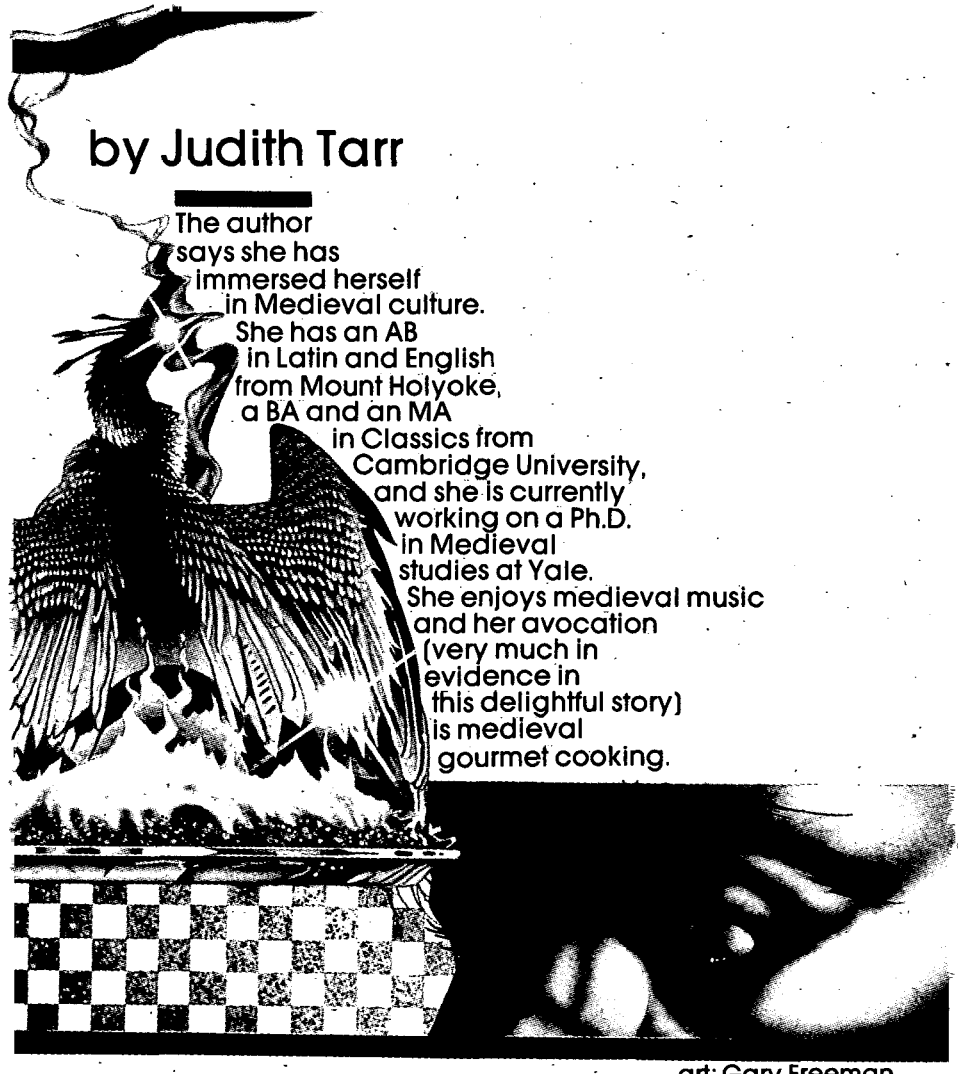
by Judith Tarr

The author says she has immersed herself in Medieval culture. She has an AB in Latin and English from Mount Holyoke, a BA and an MA in Classics from Cambridge University, and she is currently working on a Ph.D. in Medieval studies at Yale. She enjoys medieval music and her avocation (very much in evidence in this delightful story) is medieval gourmet cooking.



art: Gary Freeman

PIÈCE DE RÉSISTANCE

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"But," said the king, "I already have a master cook."

His counselor smiled. "Indeed, Sire, you do: the master of all master cooks. And yet even the greatest master is, after all, a man. He grows old. He longs for his own country. He curses the sun and the dust, and sighs for the soft air of Provence. Could he but return there, enriched for life by the bounty of the King of Jerusalem, how joyful he would be!"

The king sighed. "Ah, Provence!" A frown marred his brow. "But, Amaury, Master Folquet is the best in the world. The Greek said so, what was his name, the one from Byzantium. And the Turk from Cairo, or was it Baghdad? And—"

Amaury coughed. The king stopped. Amaury said very gently, "My lord brother of course is perfectly correct. And why should the High King concern himself with such a trifle as the wishes of his cook? The earth here is the most holy in the world; who would refuse to lie in it for a grave in green Provence?"

The king's frown deepened. Amaury waited. At length the king struck the arm of his chair with a massive fist. "All right then. All right! Show me this genius who'll thrust Master Folquet out of his kitchen."

"Who will help you to grant Master Folquet's deepest desire," said Amaury, not precisely as if he were correcting the king.

His Majesty glowered and rose. "Of course, of course. You do all the thinking for both of us anyway. Raymond, tell the groom to saddle my charger. I'll take a turn or two at the quintain."

He was gone in royal haste. Amaury smiled, not at all the same smile with which he had favored his liege, and followed in much more leisurely fashion.

The Mouse swallowed a sneeze. It was infernally dusty behind the arras, which said nothing at all for the king's servants. Now if Master Folquet had had anything to do with them—

He choked on dust and sudden recollection. Master Folquet was going to be sent away. Back to Provence with money enough to set him up in his own kitchen, serving his own dishes in his own time; the dream he invoked eloquently whenever the purity of his art collided with the reality of his kitchen.

A wave of the king's hand and he would have what he prayed for.

The Mouse held his breath, listening. Not a sound. With utmost care he crept to the joining of two tapestries and peered through the gap. The room was empty. Quick and quiet as the creature he was named for, he bolted for his hole.

Master Folquet was in a passion. A passion such as only Master Folquet could muster, quiet, restrained, and civilized. Master Folquet was an

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educated man; he was never uncivilized. Though once, when one of the scullions had dropped a platter with a crash at the very instant when Master Folquet was completing the final perfect curve of a ram's horn in marzipan, he had been heard to raise his voice a full degree. The scullions were still pale with the memory of it, and given to starting at shadows.

This was a less splendid passion. The fourth assistant pastry cook, sent for fennel seed, had returned with anise instead. Master Folquet was flaying him slowly in all the colors of his glorious rhetoric. The Mouse slipped invisibly into the line of scullions scouring pans, every one laboring diligently and listening in breathless awe.

"Provence," sighed Master Folquet. "Lovely Provence! There are fools there; there are idiots; there are mooncalves of truly abysmal stupidity. But none to equal the asses of Jerusalem."

The Mouse set his lip between his teeth and attacked a stubborn stain, and tried to keep his heart from hammering. One did not—if one was a lowly scullion—one did *not* venture to address the Master Cook. One was addressed imperially through a parade of underlings, or one was blessedly ignored. One did not have a mind; one did not have eyes except for one's work; and most of all, one did not have a penchant for prowling hidden passages and eavesdropping on the king.

The Mouse listened to Master Folquet's glorious voice and scoured pans, and wrestled his conscience into submission. After all, Master Folquet wanted to go back to Provence.

The king looked the petitioner up and down. The man bowed low for the hundredth time and smiled. His face was made for smiling, vast and round and jovial, with a little fringe of black beard and a pair of eyes sunk deep in the pale-brown skin like currants in a pastry. He was huge; he was magnificent; he was the embodiment of a cook. Even his voice was perfect, a warm smooth voice, dark gold and sweet like Hymettus honey. "I am utterly at Your Majesty's service, if Your Majesty should deign to accept one as humble as I."

The king raised his chin a little to a more kingly angle. His eyes were deep and brooding; his face was awesome in repose. "Amaury," he said to his brother who stood beside him, "is this man a paynim?"

The cook bowed even more deeply than before. "Indeed, most puissant lord, this worthless dog was once a slave of Mohammed. But he has seen the light, oh aye, long since; the blessed Christ is now his master."

"As the Emperor of Byzantium will attest," said Amaury smoothly, "along with a truly imperial commendation of his culinary skills. To which also will testify the Doge of Venice, the Lord of the Holy Roman Empire, and"—he paused for an instant—"the lord Pope himself."

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The king frowned portentously. "Powerful testimonials. Yes, very powerful indeed. But, Amaury, what will Master Folquet say to all of this?"

His counselor paused. The cook bowed to the carpet. "If Your Majesty will permit—Your Majesty, after all, is the king. But if Your Highness is troubled, perhaps Your Puissance will deign to ask him yourself."

Amaury nodded gravely. "The act of a wise and clement king, to be sure, to grant a faithful servant his freedom and his fortune in one noble gesture."

"Well then," said the king, "send for him."

Master Folquet, sent for, showed no sign of either haste or anxiety. But the Mouse, behind the arras, saw with a shiver that his nostrils were just touched with white.

He did not choose to notice the cook. The counselor won a precise bow, the king one deeper but no less precise. "My lord commands me?" he inquired. The king frowned at him. Beside that magnificent bulk he seemed very slight and very stiff, with a face like a monk's: thin and ascetic and most alarmingly intelligent. He did not look like a cook at all, nor act like one, nor sound like one. And his hair, though beautifully cut, was thin and going grey.

"Tell him, Amaury," said the king.

Amaury bowed and turned his pale wise face upon the Master. "Master Folquet, His Majesty has given long and deep thought to the excellence of your service. What reward, he has asked himself, can possibly compensate such fidelity? What gift can he give to reveal to you his deep gratitude? What recompense save that which, in all the world, you most desire?"

Master Folquet waited and said nothing. His lips had thinned. The Mouse trembled.

"What recompense," repeated Amaury, "but the greatest of them all? Provence, Master Folquet—His Majesty gives you back your homeland, with a barony to set you high in it and a wagonload of gold to secure your place there. Master Folquet, this day is your fortune made!"

It was a ringing conclusion; it rang in silence. Master Folquet moved not at all. He might, perhaps, have been speechless with astonishment.

The Mouse knew better.

At long last he stirred, to bow, to straighten, to say in his precise, trained voice, "I thank His Majesty with all my heart. But I cannot accept his gifts."

The king gaped in most unkingly fashion. The cook forsook his smile. Amaury drew a slow breath. "You . . . refuse?"

"I refuse," said the Master. "With all due courtesy, and with a plea to His Majesty to remember that I am not a baron or a rich merchant. I am a cook. Have I given His Majesty cause for dissatisfaction?"

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Amaury opened his mouth. But the king had recovered most of his wits. "No, sir. No indeed! We're perfectly satisfied. But you see, Master Folquet, you aren't getting any younger and Provence isn't getting any closer. And here's this master cook, highly recommended in all the best places, who's ready and willing to take over for you. After, of course, you've gone off to a well-earned retirement."

Master Folquet drew himself up to his full height. "Retirement, Sire?" he asked very softly.

"Riches," said the king. "Leisure. Contentment. In blessed Languedoc."

"Languedoc." Master Folquet smiled the merest shadow of a smile. "I dream of it. However, Your Majesty, I am at heart a realist. A dream gained is a very feeble thing. Nor," he said in the gentlest of tones, "can I be bribed with it. If my lord is not content, he may dispose of me as he wills. He need not wrap his displeasure in gilt."

The king glanced at Amaury, but his counselor was frowning at the floor. "Look here," he said, "I'm giving you your heart's desire. And I've engaged another cook. Or Amaury has. Can't you just kiss my hand and thank me, and let it go at that?"

Master Folquet stood perfectly erect and perfectly still. "Very well. I am dismissed. I shall leave directly."

"Sire!" The cook advanced, bowing and smiling. "Sire, my lord, my good Master, need we part in bitterness? The Master is the prince of cooks, I but an apprentice beside him. Yet if he wishes it, and if His Majesty desires, we may resolve the matter to the satisfaction of all concerned." He beamed at them. "A contest, sirs! Let us have a feast. Half the courses I shall prepare to the best of my poor ability; to half the Master will devote his famous art. And let a court of noblemen sit in judgment upon us. For the victor, the mastery of His Majesty's kitchen; for the vanquished, freedom to go wherever he wills with His Majesty's commendation."

The king's eyes gleamed. "A contest," he said. "A contest. By'r'Lady, there you have it! What do you say, Master Folquet? Would you settle the score that way? Winner take all and Devil take the hindmost."

Master Folquet bowed with perfect correctness. "If so my lord desires," he said. Deep in his eyes a spark had caught, brighter and fiercer even than the king's.

II.

It was a rare diversion between battles and tournaments, invasions of Saracens and invasions of pilgrims: a struggle for the mastery of the royal kitchen. Although the feast would not be held until a fortnight

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hence, at Pentecost, already the curious had begun to gather and the rumors to fly.

By the grace of the king and the graciousness of Jusuf his rival, Master Folquet held sway in his old domain. Jusuf settled near, yet not too near, in the dusty labyrinth that had served the master cook of the first King of Jerusalem. He asked for no aid and no servants; he had his own, he said with his everlasting smile, and would not presume upon the king's generosity. Later, however, if by God's will he had the victory . . . He smiled and said no more.

Master Folquet said nothing at all. And did nothing, it seemed, but what he had always done. If he prepared any great masterpiece, the Mouse saw no sign of it. His kitchen lay open to any who dared to venture in; he disposed of the inquisitive with a few scathing phrases, and kept his underlings at their usual work.

Jusuf's quarter was shut and barred. The Mouse, loitering about, saw nothing and no one. Sometimes he heard strange sounds or caught a scent as of spices, but that was all. There were no windows to peer through and no hangings to hide behind, and every bolt-hole was most efficiently stopped up.

But the Mouse had one virtue which even his enemies would admit to. He persevered.

Which was why, on a starless night very close to Pentecost, one pillar of the old courtyard had a double shadow. The air was breathlessly warm even so late, but the Mouse shivered in his thin tunic. He hardly knew what had possessed him to leave his bed in the corner of the hearth between Ali and the kitchen cat. If there was nothing to see by day, what could he expect to find in the dark?

He tensed. Lights flickered across the court: torches, leaping and flaring as their bearers moved. They could be guards mounting the walls maybe, or a lord coming late from the city, but guards and lords were noisy with armor or with drink. These made no sound.

A huge shape loomed in the archway. The Mouse shrank behind his pillar; the shape dwindled, became a man laden with a heavy bale. And another came after him, and another, soft on bare feet, flanked by torchbearers. The procession streamed toward Jusuf's door, which opened silently. A gleam of light stabbed the darkness. The bearers passed within. The door shut; the light was gone; the Mouse remembered how to breathe.

His brain shrieked to him to dive for safety. His feet carried him through the shadows to the door. Just beyond it lay an old fishpond, empty now and treacherous in the dark, but railed with stone. The Mouse crouched behind it with every sense alert.

For a long while there was nothing. But the nape of his neck prickled;

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his lips drew back from his small sharp teeth. The air felt different here. It felt wrong.

It had felt that way when he hid behind the arras and watched the stranger-cook bow and smile and protest his unworthiness. Protest, and propose a contest he could not but lose if he told the truth.

The wrongness was stronger here. Maybe it was the dark and the weed-choked fishpond, and the utter silence.

Again the door opened. The light behind it was red. The Mouse had a brief, searing vision of all within, before a man's shadow blocked it and the door thudded shut.

The Mouse crouched shuddering under a safe, sane, yellow cresset outside of his own familiar kitchen. Within, he could hear snores and the rustling of bodies on straw. Soon the bakers would be up, beginning the day's bread.

He could not stop shaking. If he could just stop—if he could just take the few steps through the door—he would be able to rest.

His feet were not his own tonight. They retreated from safety; they stumbled up a steep narrow stair; they brought him through a curtain and into light.

The scullions were certain that Master Folquet never slept. The Mouse had confirmation of it. For here in the black midnight, he sat in his bedchamber with a book in his hand, no whit less impeccable than he was at high noon. He regarded the intruder with an utter lack of surprise. "Well?" he asked.

The Mouse could not speak.

Master Folquet raised a fine brow. There was a cup by his elbow; he set it in the Mouse's limp fingers. "Drink," he said.

One never disobeyed Master Folquet. The drink was honeyed wine; it warmed the Mouse's cold belly and steadied his quaking knees. He set the cup carefully in its place.

"Well?" Master Folquet said again. "You would be one of mine, I suppose. He of the long elegant name. Abd-er-Rahman Mohammed."

"Mouse, Master," he mumbled. "Just Mouse."

"Mouse, then. It is quite apt. Now, suppose you sit on my bed, which is a good deal steadier than your legs seem to be, and tell me why I should not have you whipped for troubling my peace."

The Master's tone was grim, but strangely enough, the Mouse was not afraid. Perhaps it was the wine. He perched on the edge of the narrow ascetic bed, pushed his tangled hair out of his eyes, and drew a long breath. Master Folquet waited in awful silence. Gathering all his courage, he began.

He told everything, from that first day behind the king's arras to the

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black courtyard and the open door and the red light in it. "And things," he said very low. "Things, Master. A cauldron; the red light was under it, not a comfortable kitchen fire—it made me think of the one in the smithy. And the—the man, Master Jusuf, standing by it, and all around him black devils. They were doing things, I couldn't see what. But Jusuf was smiling, and stirring the cauldron with a long white rod like a bone with words written all over it. I saw them; they moved like bits of fire up and down the rod. And Jusuf *smiled*."

The Mouse stopped. He was shaking again. Master Folquet filled the cup and handed it back to him. He drank deep, until his eyes blurred and his head spun. Through the fog of wine he heard Master Folquet's voice. "And you came to me. Why?"

"Why?" the Mouse repeated stupidly. "Why, Master? He's a sorcerer. He's evil. What if—what if he means to bewitch the king?"

"What if he is only preparing a secret masterpiece by firelight, with his servants about him?"

The Mouse sat bolt upright. The empty cup slid from his hand and clattered to the floor; he hardly noticed. "Master, I didn't tell you everything. There's something else I saw. The man who came out was . . . was my lord Amaury. And he said something. He said, 'Remember. For this, you use only the delights of the eyes and of the palate. Later, when we are well rid of that long-nosed clerk who rules my brother's stomach and hence his brain as well, you may work your greater magics.' And he laughed and said, 'Then shall I be king in name as well as in fact, and you my counselor. Cast your spells well for me!' " The Mouse smote his hands together in desperation. "Please, Master. You have to believe me. You have to do something!"

Master Folquet looked at him. Simply looked. The Mouse should have quailed; would have, if this had been daylight and he his usual self. But there was the wine, and he had seen what he had seen. He met the cold eyes with wondrous steadiness and firmed his jaw and waited.

The Master nodded slowly. "You deserve a proper tanning. Spying indeed! And most of it when you were on duty besides. But this—You realize, boy, that if what you tell me is true, our adversaries may be aware of all we say and do here."

The Mouse started violently and stared about, wild-eyed.

"However," said Master Folquet, "I like to fancy that we are protected." His glance drew the Mouse's to the door-curtain. Over it hung a small crucifix carved from olivewood. The Mouse crossed himself quickly.

"A Christian, are you, boy?" the Master asked him.

"My mother was, Master."

"So." Master Folquet nodded again. "Tell me what you would do if you were I."

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For a long moment the Mouse was speechless. Master Folquet made no move. The Mouse swallowed and told him.

There was a silence. The Mouse trembled. To his utter and lasting astonishment, Master Folquet laughed. It was an amazing laugh, light and free and very young; it transformed the Master's face, almost made a boy of him. For a few moments only. All at once he was the Master again, calm and austere and terrible. "Do it then," he said, "and tell no one at all. If you fail, I shall have only my poor mortal skill to set against the arts of a sorcerer. If you succeed . . . perhaps, just perhaps—if you swear a solemn vow to curb your penchant for eavesdropping on His Majesty—I shall see that you gain the reward you deserve."

The Mouse threw himself down with bursting heart and kissed the Master's feet.

III.

The great feast of Pentecost found all the High Court in the king's hall in Jerusalem. The gathered might of Outremer was resplendent in the silks and jewels of the East, overlaid with the sweetness of Arabian unguents. Here and there was a darker shape, a priest, a pilgrim from the West come to marvel at the magnificence of this kingdom beyond the sea. The king sat on his throne above them all, gold crown glittering on bright-gold hair, and his robe all of cloth of gold. Close beside him sat his brother Amaury in silk as splendid as his ambitions and as dark as his plotting, and close about him the judges of the feast: the queen enthroned at her lord's side in cloth of silver; the Grand Master of the Knights Templar, all in white save for the scarlet cap of his Order and the blood-red cross upon his breast; the Cardinal Légate of His Holiness the Pope of Rome; and that most celebrated of connoisseurs, the Ambassador of the Emperor of Byzantium, contemplating the scene before him and not quite smiling.

The trumpeters blew the fanfare. A herald advanced, bowed low to the king, and proclaimed, "Your Majesties; Your Excellencies; my lords and ladies of the High Court of the Kingdom of Jerusalem: We gather here on this day of Pentecost to judge a matter of great moment. Master Jusuf of Damascus and of Qum, artist and master cook, has challenged Master Folquet of St.-Géraud in Provence to a contest of skill, the victor to gain the mastery of the royal kitchens, the vanquished to depart and to go where he wills, so that it not be into the kitchens of His Majesty, Guy, High King of Jerusalem. Let this be the way of it, that each Master shall produce three full courses in honor of the perfection of the Holy Trinity; each course shall be constructed about a theme set by His Majesty; and

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each shall follow the other in due alternation, with first honors to the challenger—unto the culmination, a subtlety which celebrates the glory of the Crusade and the splendor of this eastern bastion of our faith against the foulness of the infidel. Your Majesties, Your Excellencies, my lords and ladies, let the banquet begin!"

The Mouse held his breath. He had chosen an excellent hiding place behind the throne, from which vantage he could see all that the king could. And he had Master Folquet's unvoiced consent for this last and boldest bit of eavesdropping.

The herald had withdrawn. The court waited, murmuring.

Trumpets rang. Drums beat beneath them. The great doors swung wide. Master Jusuf passed through them in flowing white, with a white turban and a wide white smile. He bowed before the king, bowed to all the judges and to the assembled court, and withdrew smoothly to the side of the hall.

All eyes had long since abandoned him. A long line of slaves advanced to the beat of the drum, each in the ancient garb of Egypt, men and women alike bewigged and bejeweled, their long eyes painted with kohl. In each pair of hands or upon each high head rode a platter of bronze worked with strange stiff figures and heaped with the delicacies of ancient Khemet. Rich scents wafted through the hall, strange sweets and spices, fine bread and finer cakes, fishes of the Nile roasted in green leaves, ibis clothed in their white feathers, a gazelle with gilded horns borne before the king. And as the court watched and marveled and the servants moved fluidly among them, the crown of the course floated through the gate as if upon air, drawn and followed by Nubian slaves: a great barge of gold and lapis, laden with sweetmeats, its oars fanning the air as it circled the hall. A soft sound sighed under the drums, a muted "Aaahh" of wonder and delight.

The Mouse hated the sorcerer with all his heart.

Master Jusuf stood aside and smiled, and watched the court partake eagerly of all that the slaves offered.

"Interesting," murmured the ambassador from Byzantium.

At a hidden signal, the slaves withdrew from among the court and departed. The barge followed them, empty now, its oars stilled.

The trumpets proclaimed the second course; shawms and sackbuts joined it in an air as familiar as the stones of Outremer. Here was no magic, no air of mystery, only pages and squires of the king's household, liveried as always, bearing the king's best plate. On it reposed the flower of Master Folquet's art. Lamb roasted on the spit, stewed in fine herbs, baked into a pie with fruits and spices. A compote of fruits from the East simmered in wine and cinnamon. White bread, unleavened as for the Passover of the Jews. And the subtlety, the lamb of sacrifice, each white

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curl of its wool wrought in marzipan by Master Folquet's hand, and all within filled with sweets and pastries. It was exquisite; it was delectable; it was, said the king, quite as good as anything the Master had produced.

"Quite good indeed," agreed the Emperor's ambassador.

Master Jusuf smiled.

His challenge came with the wailing of flutes and the tinkling of the lyre, a procession of Greek youths and maidens centered about the great carcass of an ox, roasted whole and wreathed in leaves as for a sacrifice and laid upon a massive platter of worked silver; and with it fish broiled upon coals and roasted birds, olives and cheese, bread and meal and honey scented with thyme. But the subtlety won a sigh which drowned out the flutes. Two and thirty pairs of mules—mules of brass and steel, no larger than the hounds which crouched beneath the tables and howled at them—drew behind them a great fire of gold, the bier of Alexander as it rolled down from Babylon. Every inch of it was wrought of rare and marvelous sugars, and endorsed with saffron that was more precious than gold.

"Charming," said the Greek, nibbling a bit of golden tassel.

Once more Master Folquet sent in his Frankish lads in the same livery as before, but facing the glory of Greece with the splendors of Rome. Pork baked in pastry; chicken flavored with juniper; tunny and other fishes broiled and sauced with garlic and herbs; a potage of lentils and mustard and spices, at which, the Mouse noticed, the queen was seen to smile and to ask for more. But no one sighed or aahed even for the masterpiece, a great wheel of the Zodiac borne by strong young squires. Its fabric was bread baked hard, each sign set in it with colored pastry. And for each sign there was a heap of delicacies: cakes or sweetened fruits or flowers jeweled with sugar, all shaped for the creature of the sign.

The Greek, engrossed in Virgo's honeyed wheaten cakes, had nothing to say.

But the Mouse heard murmurs. "Tastes good." "*Is* good. But not much of a show, eh what? Like a good show, I do." "What's a show if it tastes like spiced straw?" "Straw! Where's your palate, man? In your behind?"

Jusuf, they were saying. And *Folquet*. And *Jusuf, Jusuf, Jusuf*.

Amaury permitted himself a small smile.

A swift drumming, the fierce cry of a shawm, brought more than one war-hardened knight to his feet, groping at his belt for his sword, but no man in the hall bore any weapon. The battle music of the Saracens brought with it a march of slaves in the robes of the desert, bearing their people's delicacies. Young kid simmered in its own milk; lamb stewed with dates; capon stuffed with figs and spices; great bowls of figs and

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dates and raisins of the sun, with flat bread and sharp goat's cheese and dark olives in their own oil.

The music paused. The drums slowed. All eyes turned to the gate. A new band of Jusuf's servitors bore upon their shoulders a great pyre redolent of spices, cinnamon and ginger, cloves and saffron and cardamom, pepper, allspice, and grains of paradise. Upon this priceless bed reposed a marvelous bird, a creature of flame and gold with eyes like living coals.

The slaves set their burdens before the king and bowing, drew away. The bird stirred and stretched its wings, and bowed as if in homage. And the pyre burst into flame, a blaze of spices engulfing the bird of fire. Its body strained, shuddered, and was consumed.

The flames died. There at the heart where the fire had been hottest glowed a great egg, hot gold. It cracked; a fiery serpent-head wove up through the opening, and a body after it, a snake of flame. It coiled amid the shards of its egg, laying down its head as if to rest.

Suddenly it writhed and swelled and bloomed. The bird of fire took wing from egg and cast-off serpent skin, soaring through the hall in an aura of fire and spices. Sweets fell from its beak into laps and a few bold hands.

The circuit came back to its beginning. The phoenix settled upon the pyre of its rebirth, tucked its head beneath its wing, and slept. The slaves bore it away.

This was no sigh of wonder; this was a full-throated cheer.

Master Folquet's lads gave it time to die down before the foremost sounded a hunting horn. His companions served forth the wealth of the West, the head of the wild boar decked with rosemary, stew of venison thickened with the blood of the stag, pheasant stewed in grapes and herbs, a peacock in the full brilliance of its plumage, small birds roasted and sauced with honey and saffron, a crustade of cream and spices and fruits, and strawberries in sweet cream. And last of all, a unicorn of white pastry collared with saffron-gold, its horn wreathed with roses; and beneath it a bed of rose petals. Yet for all the white beast's flawless beauty, the phoenix had left the court with no taste for any lesser creature. They ate with relish, but they said nothing; their eyes flickered, caught and loosed and caught again by Jusuf's smile. Even the judges nodded toward him as if their choice was made, although the Greek's eye had a strange glint.

The remains of the unicorn departed, the spiral horn, a rose or two, the sharp sweetness of crushed mint. Jusuf advanced to the dais and bowed. "Your Majesties," he said, "my lord judges. We come now to the dénouement. Out of courtesy to the Master who is my adversary in the contest, may I beg that he be permitted to witness its ending?"

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"He is here," said a quiet voice at his elbow.

The Mouse had a brief and glorious vision of Jusuf taken utterly aback. But that wily sorcerer was not long or easily discomfited. His smile, which had slipped, returned undiminished; he bowed. "Ah, my good Master! At last we stand together. Shall we stand so until the end?"

Master Folquet bowed his head the merest degree, made reverence to the high ones, and withdrew with Jusuf to the side of the dais. He seemed quite calm as always, quite unperturbed by the whispers that ran among the courtiers. How much like a master cook the stranger looked; and Folquet—why, he might be a clerk or a priest, with no smile to spare for anyone. Now Jusuf was a jovial man, master showman, an artist, one the whole world would envy and Jerusalem could boast of. Who but he could have brought the very phoenix to wait upon them in their High King's hall?

"But," said a lonely voice, "it's all show. Looks good; smells good; but it doesn't taste like anything at all."

The others drowned him out, even as the Mouse braced to leap for his bolt-hole and run.

The court sat with bated breath. Here was the last stroke, the master stroke. The king stirred on his throne; as if that had been the signal, cymbals clashed. Pipes shrilled. Drums beat in counterpoint. Through the gate, stepping to the rhythm, graceful as young deer, came such servants that the knights of the court stretched their eyes and their ladies pursed their lips in delicate disapproval. Houris in veils as fragile as mist, with great dark eyes glowing above them, promising ecstasies. They swayed and swirled down the center of the hall; where their tiny hennaed feet had passed, mists curled and grew. Dark at first, thinning and elongating: the mist became slender shadowy trunks swelling and thickening and raising aloft their branches. Then a shimmer of green as leaves unfurled; blossoms burst there in a wave of sweet scent, a fall of petals upon raven hair and white shoulders, a gleam of burgeoning fruit: orange, lemon, pomegranate. The houris, dancing, gathered the harvest as others bore in goblets of sherbet, snow-cold, flavored with citron. The Mouse eeled toward his exit, running as if the world depended on it.

As the last of the sherbet vanished from the king's cup, hoofs rattled on tiles. Jusuf started a little; Master Folquet never moved. A ripple of notes stirred the scented air. A milk-white jennet stood in the gate with a squire at her bridle, and on her back a figure in extravagant motley, a jongleur from his long yellow curls to his belled toes. As the squire led the donkey forward, the minstrel's agile voice joined his agile fingers upon the lutestrings, singing that song which the troubadour Folquet de Marselha made upon the glory of God.

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Nine pages followed the singer, bearing great baskets; nine pages, and a tenth who was somewhat smaller and considerably darker than the rest, breathing hard under the unaccustomed richness of his livery, eyes fixed with great care upon the back of the boy in front of him. But he had a nose to take in the scents of magic and of citrus, and ears to hear the minstrel's sweet trained voice. There was no other sound. The houris had stopped their dancing when the lute cut through the drumming; the drums themselves had faltered and gone mute.

The singer paused between verses. The jennet entered the strange grove. In a single movement the pages began to scatter their largesse, white cakes like manna flavored with almonds and honey, each marked with a small cross. The houris drew back through the trees. Jusuf's smile wavered; his fingers worked.

A gasp ran through the court. For where the manna fell, leaves withered and fruit shriveled and branches writhed and smoked. One small cake, flung by the smallest page, struck a houri's shoulder. She shrieked, piercing and terrible, as hideous as a peacock's cry. Her shoulder was blackened as with fire, a blackness that spread as she stood rooted in her place, overcame and consumed her, till naught remained of her but a faint foul smoke. The pages fanned through the trees, hurling cakes now in handfuls, and the trees wavered and began to fade. The houris ran like deer before the hunters. But the tables of the court hemmed them in and the pages surrounded them. First one, then another and another, blurred and shifted and took wing, black birds like ravens that flapped and croaked but could not escape the relentless assault. The jongleur neither wavered nor dropped a note, even when his mount stopped full before the astounded face of the king.

The grove shimmered like a mirage and vanished. The last black bird fled shrieking into nothingness. The hall was clean, save for the white drifts of manna upon the floor. The pages stood in a circle; the singer sang the last sweet "Amen."

Jusuf smiled no longer. He edged away from Master Folquet toward Amaury, but stopped, surrounded by pages. The Mouse stood closest, almost within arm's reach. Yet a handful remained in his basket; he scooped it up.

Jusuf's fingers wove shapes of fire in the air. The Mouse could feel them on his skin, a searing, blinding agony. He blinked away tears of pain, clamped his lip between his teeth, and let fly.

Jusuf howled in agony. The honeyed cakes clung to him, to his face and his hands and his breast. He tore at them, and tearing, shrank. The noble master cook had melted away. In his place crouched an old, old man no larger than a dwarf, swathed in voluminous white. He shrieked

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curses in a high cracked voice, stretching out his hands toward Amaury. The king's counselor made no move to aid or to hinder him.

The king rose from his throne. But the Grand Master of the Templars was before him with the light of battle in his eye, thundering in Latin the mighty syllables of the exorcism. The sorcerer raised clawed hands as if to counter with a spell.

"Serpent of the Devil," said Master Folquet quite calmly, "get thee gone." He crossed himself as a proper Christian should.

The sorcerer's curses rose to a wordless scream, the cry of a bird; black wings rose out of the white robes. Before any word or hand could catch him, he fled through the open gate and was gone.

There was a long and breathless silence. One or two ladies and at least one young nobleman had fainted; many another looked slightly ill to have eaten, with such unheeding pleasure, the creations of sorcery.

Very quietly under their Master's eye, the pages began to gather up the cakes which they had scattered. Their movement broke the spell; the court erupted.

Master Folquet stepped into the open space before the dais. Something in his bearing spread calmness. The uproar faded; those whose nerves were steadier sought further strength in wine. Squires moved among them filling cups, restoring a semblance of normality.

The king had not returned to his throne, although he had taken a deep draft of wine. The judges sat on either side of him in attitudes of shock or horror or wide-eyed fascination; save for Amaury, whose face, though drained of color, wore no expression at all. His Majesty ignored them. "What," he demanded of Master Folquet, "did you *do?*"

The Master beckoned. The Mouse left his gathering of manna and approached slowly, eyes down. "Speak," commanded the Master.

The king was awesome and terrible, but Master Folquet was the Master. The Mouse obeyed. In a very small voice at first, hardly to be heard. But little by little it grew stronger, and the court hushed to hear it. He told all that he had seen and heard and done, save one thing only. He did not name Amaury's name. He did not know exactly why, for he hated the schemer with a fine fierce hate, but he was glad after all. For Master Folquet's glance flickered at the omission, and he nodded very slightly, with the suggestion of a smile. Amaury relaxed by slow degrees; a ghost of color returned to his cheeks.

"So," said the Mouse at last in ringing silence, "the Master gave me what I asked for, a bag and enough flour to fill it and a man to help me carry it. We went out into the city to a place I know. A church, my lord, very small and very old and almost forgotten, exactly like its priest. He's nearly blind, too. He was glad enough to lay a blessing on our bag, even

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without the bit of silver we paid him for it and the napkinful of food that the Master himself had made.

"We brought the flour back, and the Master took it and made it into cakes. If it's blasphemy, my lord, it's my fault, not my Master's, and you must punish me. But it did what we meant it to do." He ended on a note of high courage, with his chin up and his shoulders back and no tremor in him anywhere.

The king stared at him. The Cardinal Legate was frowning; the Grand Master gnawed his lip. But the Greek grinned in his curled black beard. "Magnificent!" he cried. "A tale worthy of an emperor's court. Your Majesty, this boy deserves his weight in gold at the very least, for his wit and his courage and his utter loyalty to his Master."

"Well," said the King, "yes. Yes, I suppose he does. It was a splendid thing to do. Splendid!"

"And," the Greek said, "as for my judgment, even without the *pièce de résistance*, I would accord Master Folquet the victory. Do my lords agree? My royal lady?"

They nodded. Even Amaury, quickly and without looking at the Master.

"Of course," said the king after a pause. "Of course. Amaury, shall I give the boy a barony? Master Folquet of course has his kitchen back, which was what I wanted in the first place."

The Master stirred. "Your pardon, Majesty, but I think perhaps, after all, I shall take what first you offered and return to Provence."

"And I," said the Mouse, "will go with him. Begging your pardon, Sire. A barony is very pleasant, but I'd rather be a cook. Master Folquet has promised to teach me," he added with great pride.

"But you can't go," the king protested. "Who'll be my cook?"

"There are cooks enough in the world, Your Majesty," said Master Folquet.

"But only one like you." Amaury had mastered himself at last and risen, smooth and urbane and wise as ever. "Who else could have defeated that monster who would have cast his spell upon the High Court? Master, we beg you. We beseech you. Do not abandon us now. Remain with us and continue to delight us with your consummate artistry."

For a long moment Master Folquet was silent, pondering, holding Amaury's veiled stare. "Suppose," he said, "that I agree. Another plausible stranger may come. Another wizard with designs on His Majesty, or a true master cook who longs to challenge me. What then?"

"Then," said Amaury, "we send him on his way and sit down to one of your inimitable feasts. What else could any wise man do?"

"Nothing, perhaps," conceded Master Folquet.

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"So stay," the king said, "and stop this nonsense. Thibaut! Wine for the Master, and a toast to his victory!"

"To victory," said Master Folquet, raising his cup; and with a deep sigh: "To my dear lost Provence."

But the Mouse had seen the glint in his eye. Triumph; relief; and a flicker of laughter. ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 23)

SOLUTION TO HUSTLE OFF TO BUFFALO

The states are Wyoming and Utah.

"Let me tell you about a remarkable numerical coincidence," I said to Hus. "The birth years of Washington, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Reagan are respectively 1732, 1809, 1882, and 1911. Put them in a row. Under the first number write the difference between it and the second number. Under the second number put the difference between it and the third. Under the third put its difference from the fourth, and under the fourth, its difference from the first."

We are concerned only with absolute differences—differences that are positive. The procedure gives a new set of four numbers, like so:

1732	1809	1882	1911
77	73	29	179

Repeat the procedure as long as possible. The result is hard to believe:

77	73	29	179
4	44	150	102
40	106	48	98
66	58	50	58
8	8	8	8
0	0	0	0

"How extraordinary!" the car exclaimed. "May I have a few minutes to analyze it?"

"Fine by me, pal. Provided you keep your perceptrons on the road."

"Don't worry. I process in parallel, as you well know."

Is it a remarkable coincidence? You'll find the Hustle's analysis on page 110.

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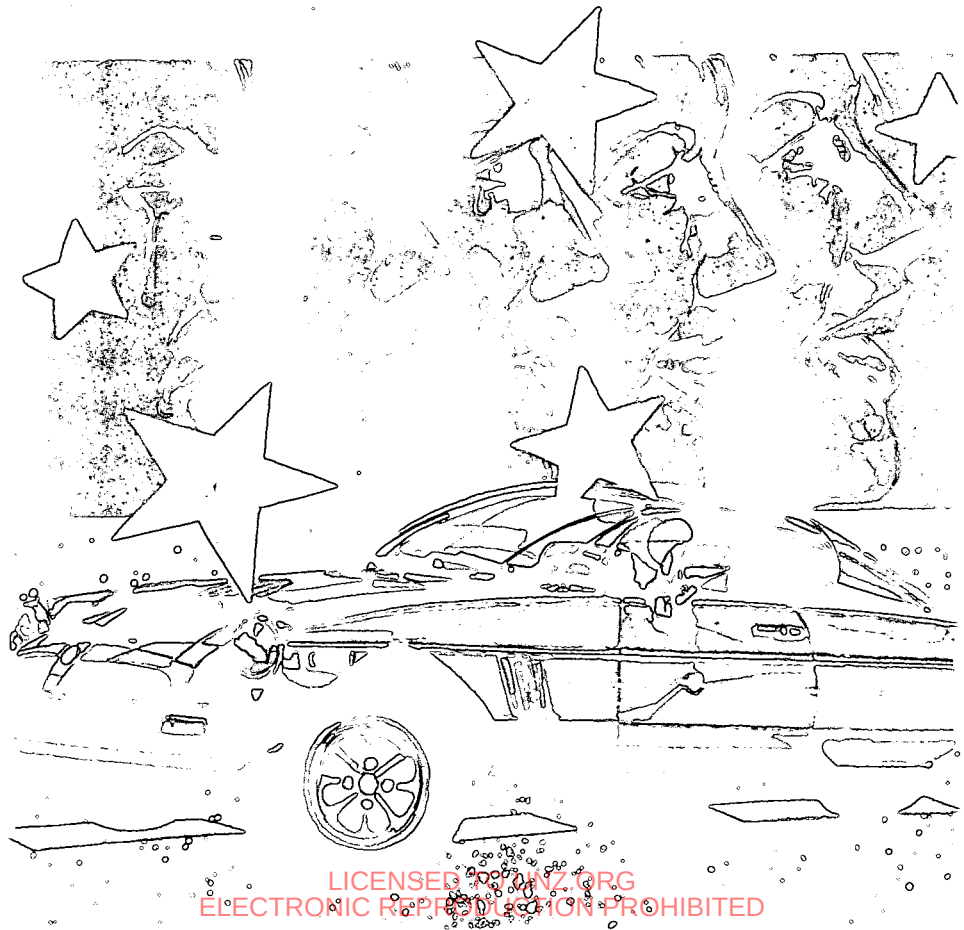
by Lisa Goldstein

art: Arthur George

DAILY VOICES

The author's second novel, *The Dream Years*, was published late last year by Bantam Books. At the moment she is working hard on a third book, but we hope she's also put some time aside for intriguing short stories such as this one . . .



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"Continue driving until you see the freeway entrance, and then push the button."

Vivian tried not to feel depressed. It looked like she was going to work today. She had been hoping for a shopping trip, though she knew she had nothing to shop for. "Continue driving until you see the freeway entrance, and then push the button," the voice said again. The freeway, only a mile from her apartment, came up on the right. She pushed the large button on the dashboard of the car. "Get on the freeway and drive until you see the Elm Street exit, then push the button."

Dammit, she thought. There would be no surprises today. She was going to work. Dammit, dammit, dammit. She wondered if she should risk saying something out loud. There was no evidence the voice could hear anything she said. But cowardice held her as always. She knew she would say nothing. And what difference would it make if she did?

The voice came on again with the same instructions. The voice came on every thirty seconds, and the voice's instructions lasted about ten seconds. She had timed it on the dashboard clock. The drive to Elm Street took over ten minutes, so she would have to hear the same instructions twenty times. She wanted to scream. She wanted to press the ugly black button on the dashboard again and again, beating it with her fists. But she didn't dare.

Instead she stared at the clock on the dashboard, watching the second hand glide slowly around the clock-face. Eight more minutes. Seven. She wondered why she had a clock in her car, wondered if everyone had one or if it was unique to her. She had never really needed it except for timing things. And what about the other things on the dashboard: the mileage-counter (at 02360.5), the pointer that showed her how fast she was going, the red lights labeled "battery" and "oil"? Did other people have those things too? She liked it when the red lights came on, because then the voice would direct her to a service station and she would get to take the bus home. The bus trip was the only time she got to hear other people and to pick up the clues she would spend hours trying to piece together.

She turned down Elm Street and pushed the button. The voice directed her to 820 Elm Street, #206. She parked the car and climbed the steps to the second story office. As she put her key in the door she could hear the voice inside the office start up immediately: "Turn on the lights and push the button."

Number 206 was a small windowless room with only a desk, a chair, a typewriter, a filing cabinet and a fan that was on all year, winter and summer. The fluorescent lights overhead stuttered as she flicked the switch and then stayed on. She went to the desk and pushed the large black button on the right hand side.

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"Alphabetize the papers on the desk and file them in the filing cabinet, then push the button," the voice said. She relaxed a little. Alphabetizing wasn't too bad, was almost fun if you didn't mind the voice in the background coming on once every thirty seconds. It gave you time to think. She hated typing, because her back hurt her after an hour, and she hated tearing apart carbons because her hands got covered with the black carbon, but alphabetizing was all right. She sat down and started putting the papers in stacks.

The voice was the only thing she could remember. On her good days she thought there must have been a life before the voice, but on bad days she wondered if the voice had started when she was born and had never let her go. She could remember back only about a year, but there was really no evidence that the year before, or the year before that, or the year before that had been any different. Certainly she could not imagine what her childhood would have been like if the voice hadn't been there.

Sometimes she thought that somewhere along the line she must have made a bad bargain, and that this was the consequence. Whenever she thought that she would try and try to remember what that bargain had been, because if she could remember it she might be able to get free of it. But she could remember nothing before her one room apartment, her car, her work, and the voice connecting them all like beads on a string.

At other times she thought that everyone had a voice in her car, her home, her office, that was just the way life was. The woman at the checkstand in the supermarket probably had one, and the man who fixed her car, and some of the people on the bus, the ones who seemed barely alive. Maybe, she sometimes thought, everyone forgets their life overnight. Maybe something went wrong and I'm the only one who remembers. That would explain the over-elaborate instructions, the ones that go on and on until I'm ready to scream. If people really didn't remember they'd need instructions like that to get them through the day.

But as always the explanation failed to satisfy her. It didn't explain the others, the woman she had seen dancing (dancing!) in the street, the teenage boys with the loud radios, the couples arguing with each other or quietly holding hands, the woman she had once seen in her rear-view mirror crying quietly inside her car. And the coffee shops and movie theaters where people seemed to go, the billboards for vacations in Rio or Paris, parties in the apartment above hers, the fireworks she had once seen flower over the city like a blessing. And anyway, most people seemed to have a radio in their cars instead of a black button; she had looked.

She wondered what it would be like to go to a movie, to take a vacation. Sometimes when she put her key in the door of her apartment and heard the voice start up inside she wanted to run away and never come back. Sometimes when she saw couples kissing in the street she felt happiness

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and yearning and desire and loneliness, and other feelings she had no words for. She wondered if other people felt these things or if she was unique, or if they felt them more than she did, if their lives were a riot of sensations.

She felt a sharp pang of envy and put her head on the desk for a moment. Her life, the only one she had, was being wasted. "Alphabetize the papers on the desk and file them in the filing cabinet, then push the button," the voice said. She had almost forgotten it. It didn't do to become depressed, she knew, though she had moments of black depression several times a day. She hurried to finish and pushed the button. "Go to the cafeteria on the corner for lunch," the voice said, "come back and push the button."

She wondered what the voice would have said if she'd finished before lunch, if that would have made any difference. She wondered what would happen if she were to go somewhere else for lunch, but as far as she knew the cafeteria was the only place to eat in the neighborhood. She left the office—the door locked behind her—and went to the corner. "A tuna fish sandwich, please," she said to the woman behind the counter at the cafeteria. They were the first words she had spoken all day.

In the afternoon she typed itemized lists of things the company was shipping—auto parts, it looked like, though the last time she had typed a list it had been furniture. When she finished, the voice directed her to her car and then to a gas station where she filled up her tank.

"Turn on to Second Street and then push the button," the voice said when she started the car. The voice was taking her to the freeway and then home. For once she didn't mind the instructions. She was tired and hungry and incapable of thought, and wanted only to go home.

She stopped at the light before the freeway. The man in the car next to her had his radio turned up loud and she listened to it eagerly, forgetting her tiredness. A song came to an end, loud and discordant. The announcer gave the title and then another voice came on. "They came from beyond the stars," the voice said, "and Earth trembled beneath their rule."

Who were they talking about? She watched the light anxiously, hoping that it wouldn't turn green. Were they talking about a movie? If it was a movie, she knew, then it wasn't real. But if it was real . . . "Coming to a theater near you!" the radio blared. The light changed and the car sped away.

It was a movie then. But suppose there were people . . . people from the stars . . . "Turn left on to the freeway and then push the button." Dammit. She had almost forgotten and gone straight, eager to follow the car with the radio. She turned left and went home.

At home the voice told her to make a hamburger, and after dinner

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directed her to the half-finished jigsaw puzzle on the coffee table. She wondered if the voice liked jigsaw puzzles because the instructions for the night never varied: "Find the next piece and push the button." This was the third puzzle she had done. The cover showed an open tin filled with different colored jelly beans. Before the jigsaw puzzles the voice had told her to embroider. Once it had directed her to buy a woodworking set, but the set had been so hard she had collapsed in tears. The voice's even, mechanical tone had started to sound sadistic. The next evening the voice told her to embroider again. It had never mentioned the woodworking set again and she had thrown it out stealthily, piece by piece.

The puzzles were relaxing, like alphabetizing. She started to think about the commercial on the radio again. Suppose the voice had come from the stars, suppose people from the stars had taken her over, and others, and were about to . . . to . . . She couldn't think what. Or maybe *she* was from the stars, sent here to observe and report back about life on Earth. Only she didn't have the faintest idea what life on Earth was like. She started to pick up a piece and then stopped. Could people live on the stars? There were probably books about it, but she couldn't afford a book. The voice kept careful track of her money. She stood and went to the window and back to the coffee table. The night was hot and she was strangely restless. The commercial had given her a new idea, her first new idea in a long time.

Finally she walked to the door and went outside. Behind her the voice said, "Find the next piece and push the button," but she ignored it. She looked up. Bright stars swam across the vast sky, a splendid and infinite array. She had never seen anything so beautiful, so much of a contrast to the finite, precisely-measured instructions of the voice. Her throat hurt to look at it. Finally after a long time she looked away.

A young man stood in front of the apartment next to hers, watching her. In the light from his apartment she could see that he was smiling. For a confused moment she wondered if she wanted to kiss him. Then he said, "It's really somethin', isn't it?"

She didn't understand what he meant. Of course it was something. Everything was something. What a stupid thing to say. She nodded, flustered, and went back to her apartment. The jigsaw puzzle was waiting, and she sat down to it with relief.

The next day there was a check for her on the desk at the office. She looked at it carefully, as she had looked at the ten or twelve checks she had gotten over the year at the office, though they never varied. "Pay to the order of Vivian Stearns," the check said. Was that her name? Did most people have two names like that, or only one, or three or four? The woman at the supermarket, for example, had a name tag that said her name was Ruby.

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She was glad to get the check because it meant the voice would let her off early to cash it. She typed for the rest of the morning and went to the cafeteria for lunch. "Hot, isn't it?" the woman behind the counter said. Vivian hesitated a long moment and then said, "It's really something." The woman nodded and gave her her tuna fish sandwich.

She went back to work feeling almost gleeful. So that was what the man last night had meant! She should have said, "Yeah, it really is," and then they could have had a long talk about the stars, and she could have asked him whether people lived on them, and then she could have invited him to her apartment— No, the voice was there. Well, maybe he would have invited her to his apartment, and she would have found out if he had a voice too.

She was sitting down to the afternoon's work—stamping papers—when she remembered the relief she felt last night back in her apartment. Why had she been so anxious to get away from him? A thought came to her—a horrible thought—and she said, "Oh, no," aloud, though she was usually so careful not to say anything the voice might hear. What if she had once had a life like everyone else's—dancing and movies and vacations—but it had gotten too complicated? What if she had gotten frightened, if she could no longer bear to talk to people because of all the ways they might misunderstand her and she misunderstand them, what if she had gotten more and more frightened, more and more confused, and finally, to simplify everything, she had set up the voice herself? What if she had arranged to work for a company, and to get paid by them, without ever seeing anyone? Her heart was pounding now, and the blood throbbed in her ears so that she could no longer hear the voice. What if there was no bad bargain, no people from the stars—what if she had done it all herself?

The wave of dizziness passed and she heard the voice say, "Stamp the papers on the desk and push the button." Could that be her voice? She had always thought it was a man's, but she didn't know what her voice sounded like. Shaking, she looked at the check again. As usual the signature was illegible. The company name on the check was Aramco, and the address a post office box. Was there a way to find out who they were?

After a few hours the voice told her to leave the office and go to the bank. It was 3:30 by the clock in the car. She was glad to get out of the heat and into the air-conditioned bank. Two people behind her in line were talking quietly. "She said she had a miscarriage but I'll bet it was an abortion," one of them said.

"But why?" the other one said. "Why would she do that?"

"To get back at her husband," said the first one. "Because he had that affair. You remember."

As usual Vivian listened intently. Was that what had happened to

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her? A miscarriage, an abortion, a husband who had an affair, a screaming fight, driving off in the night with no destination in mind, crying in the car like that woman she had seen once? Life could be so horrible, so complicated. Would she take it back if she could? Did she really want to know? When she reached the teller she decided that she did. She cashed the check, asked for a money order to pay her rent, and while the teller was filling out the money order asked, "Do you know— Is there any way to tell who sends me this check? I mean, where it comes from?"

The teller looked at her for a long moment. "Honey, you mean you don't *know?*" she said finally.

"I— No, I don't."

"You mean to tell me you don't know who you work for," the teller said.

Vivian nodded. She wished she hadn't said anything. Behind her the line stirred impatiently.

"I guess— Hell, I don't know." The teller thought a moment. "I guess I would go to this post office here and watch who goes to the box," she said. "The post office is just around the corner. There's no way I can tell you who they are—I don't have access to those records."

Vivian nodded again. "Thanks," she said finally. She picked up her cash and the money order and tried not to look as if she were running from the room. The two people next in line were still deep in conversation.

She drove home and, on the voice's instruction, put the money order in the manager's mailbox, Box #1. There was a Box #7, corresponding to the number of her apartment, but she had never seen anything in it. She wondered, as she did every month, what would happen if she didn't pay the rent, if she saved the money until she had enough to start over somewhere else, in an apartment without a large black button. Would they evict her? Once on the bus she had seen an advertisement that said, "Evicted? Legal Aid can help." She had wanted to copy down the phone number but hadn't dared. And no one else had been paying the slightest attention to the ads; maybe it was wrong somehow.

After dinner she could not concentrate on the jigsaw puzzle. "I guess I would go to this post office here," the woman at the bank had said. What if she just went? The voice would think she was taking an extraordinarily long time to find the next piece in the puzzle. But so what? She got up, went to the window, went back to the puzzle. The heat of the evening was stifling. She wished she had an air conditioner. Maybe she could take the fan home from the office. No, that was crazy. What was wrong with her? It was no wonder she needed a voice to tell her what to do—she was a freak, filled with wild emotions, not to be trusted to make her own decisions.

"Find the next piece and push the button," the voice said. And the next

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piece, and the next, and so on until she died. What *right* did the voice have? She deserved to know. She would go to the post office, she would confront them, him or her, and . . . and . . . And what? She couldn't think, could only hear the pounding of her heart. After I find this next piece, she thought. No, she thought. Do it now.

Before she could change her mind she picked up her purse and left the apartment. She looked up at the sky, the myriad stars, and felt a little safer. Nothing bad could happen to her beneath that bright canopy. She got in the car and turned the key.

When she heard the voice she thought she would die. It was true, then: the voice watched her at every moment, knew exactly what she was up to. She waited for her punishment. The voice repeated three times before she heard the words. "Go to Main Street and push the button," it said. The voice thought it was morning! She felt silly with relief. The voice thought it was morning and was sending her to the supermarket. The voice was stupid, stupider than she'd ever hoped. Escape was easy. Why hadn't she done this before?

She drove away from the curb before she realized the voice wasn't going to tell her what to do next. She had to figure her own itinerary. She thought of all the streets in the city, most of which she had never seen, separating and coming together in a great maze. What if she just drove away, threading through the city endlessly, timing herself by the dashboard clock to return in an hour? What if she got lost? The thought made her giddy. Then she remembered her determination. She thought she could find the way to the bank, and the post office, the woman at the bank had said, was just around the corner.

The city looked strange at night, different, as though it had another life. Two cars flashed their lights at her, on and off, on and off, before she realized she hadn't turned the car's lights on. She missed two turns and had to backtrack, once for fifteen minutes, spellbound by the dark night and the lights of the city, like stars scattered on Earth.

The post office was dark when she finally found it. No, she thought, despairing. I didn't know. It's not fair. She got out of the car to make sure. The post office was closed. She peered through the window, trying to see something in the gloom, then read the hours painted on the glass door, 9-5 Monday through Friday, 9-12 Saturday.

That teller must be crazy, she thought. How could I watch the post office during the day, every day this week? Doesn't she think I work? She went back to the car and sat for a long time. She felt frustrated, blocked at every turn. The voice was far too clever for her. So what if she had escaped it for a night? The voice would have her back. She was still a prisoner.

The depression came on her again, and this time she couldn't stop it

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by following the voice's instructions. She started the car and headed home. "Go to Main Street and push the button," the voice said. Shut up, she thought. Shut up, shut up, shut up.

The man from the apartment next door was outside again when she drove up. "Hi," he said when she got out of the car.

"Hi," she said.

"This heat is amazing, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes," she said. He seemed to want more from her. "It's really something," she said.

"You know, on nights like this I just want to get away," he said. "Just get into my car and drive. You know what I mean?"

She stared at him. He had said exactly what she was thinking. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I know."

"Where would you go?" he said. "If you could. Anywhere at all."

That was a hard one. She only knew the city, and the names of a few other cities she had seen while typing addresses. But which one should she say? Maybe a city from a billboard. She didn't want him to think she was stupid. *He already thinks you're stupid,* she thought. Most people don't take this long answering a simple question. Look at the expression on his face. She thought of their conversation last night and said finally, looking at the stars, "Up there?"

He laughed. "I'm with you," he said. "I'm Russ, by the way. Your new neighbor. And you?"

"Vivian," she said, since he had given only one name. Maybe he only had one.

"Okay, Vivian," he said. "I'll see you around."

"Bye," she said. She went into her apartment. "Find the next piece and push the button," the voice said immediately. She closed the door quickly, hoping he hadn't heard.

The voice got her to bed at eleven and then stopped. From eleven to seven in the morning was her time, time to think lazily and to dream. She usually fell asleep after about fifteen minutes. Tonight she wondered if she would sleep at all.

Lying there in the dark she called up a picture of Russ. Did he think she was good-looking? She had only one mirror, a small hand-held one, and what she had seen in it was discouraging. She was too pale, especially in comparison with the women on the billboards, and there was something else wrong with her face—it was too square, maybe, or too angular. The voice had never let her buy the advertised cosmetics and she didn't know what to do with them if it had.

He had liked her answer, though. What had he said? I'm going too. No, he'd said, I'm with you. She sat upright in bed as a new idea came to her. What if he had meant just that, that he was with her? What if

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he was from the stars, from the stars like she was, and he had come to take her home? In that case she had said exactly the right thing. But when would he take her? Tomorrow, maybe, or the next day. She saw a group of people on a large ship, standing and talking and laughing, and one of them saying, "But what are they like? What are people on Earth like?" And she would laugh and say, "They're so strange. You wouldn't believe it. They have expressions like, 'It's really something.' I mean, what does that mean?"

But the man—Russ—had taught her that expression. So he couldn't be from the stars, could he? She had invented the whole thing, and only because—because she didn't want to think about her other new theory. That she had set up the voice. That she was jailer and prisoner both. And that—even more terrifying—if she had set it up she could stop it. There was nothing to prevent her from never following the voice's commands again.

She drifted toward sleep. "I'm with you," the man had said. "I just want to get away. Just get into my car and drive . . . Where would you go?"

She awoke the next day feeling profoundly different. I did it, she thought. Last night. I really did it. I got away. When the voice told her to wear her brown suit she put on her red dress instead and pushed the button. The voice calmly went on to the next instruction. She cooked her egg for five minutes instead of three. I can do it, she thought. Look, I'm doing it. She felt dizzy with freedom. I'm going to go, she thought. I'm going to escape. Today. She had to stop, to rest her head on the coffee table, before the trembling would go away. Maybe last night Russ had given her a message from the people who lived on the stars. Just get away, he'd said. It was a little like the voice's instructions, but not as specific. And probably Russ is just some guy who's moved next door, she thought, but I need to believe he's giving me instructions. Just for now. I don't know if I can make it on my own.

She stepped outside. I can go *anywhere,* she thought. At the thought she nearly turned and went back inside the apartment, but she forced herself to go on. When she passed Russ's apartment she wanted to stop, to knock on his door and see if he had more instructions for her, something more specific. Instead she went to the car and got in.

"Go to Main Street and push the button," the voice said as she started the car. She laughed out loud. She had known the voice was going to say that, but the voice hadn't known that she knew it. The voice was stupid, stupider than she was.

She turned the car around in a neighbor's driveway and headed toward Main Street. No, wait, she thought, panicking. What am I doing? Her hand reached out to push the button. "Turn left on Main Street and drive

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until Eleventh Street," the voice said, "and push the button." All right, she thought. I'll go to the supermarket and get on the freeway near there. She hoped she would do it. Panic was guiding her moves now, and she was no longer as certain as she was this morning. She gripped the steering wheel tightly.

"Turn left on Eleventh Street," the voice said, "park at the supermarket and push the button." She drove on, watching the supermarket come up closer and closer on the right. Her hands on the steering wheel were clenched, bloodless. Russ wants you to do this, she thought. No. *I* want to do this. She passed the supermarket and turned onto the freeway.

For a moment she thought the strange noise she heard was the voice. Then she realized she was crying, crying and laughing both. "Turn left on Eleventh Street," the voice said. She hit the button, hit it again and again, listening in wonder as the voice measured out day after day she would not have to live. She drove on, into the unimaginable future. ●

MARTIN GARDNER (from page 99)

SECOND SOLUTION TO HUSTLE OFF TO BUFFALO

After experimenting with a few hundred sets of four randomly chosen numbers, the Hustle concluded that regardless of what the numbers are—they may even be irrational, such as pi or the square root of 13—the procedure always ends, after a finite number of steps, with a row of zeros. It is not difficult to prove this, but the proof is too lengthy to give here. It's harder to show that the procedure works for any set of k numbers if and only if k is a power of 2. It will not work, for example, on every set of five, six, or seven numbers, but it *will* work for any eight numbers because $8 = 2^3$.

I close with an anagram problem from the Hustle that I won't answer until next month. Rearrange the letters of ROAST MULES to make a familiar English word.

The solution to last month's spelling-bee puzzle is the opening line of Isaac Watts's poem "Against Idleness and Mischief." The first stanza is:

How doth the little busy bee
Improve each shining hour,
And gather honey all the day
From every opening flower.

Lewis Carroll's parody begins:

How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail,
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden scale.

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DANGEROUS FISSION

He was of two minds—
a Janus-child.
like severed Geminis attached
to separate skies.

Climb aboard the Argo, *cornfield boy,*
you'll see the great Pleiades themselves,
the crisp, untwinkling swirl of Andromeda,
the death of suns point blank.

He considered, shrugged, gazed wistfully at the sky,
sifted a clump of rich, black soil through his fingers,
scanned a field of August cornstalks higher than he could reach,
then took a breath, sighed, looked at the sky again:

and bade the Earth goodbye. * and opted to remain.
*

A pilot—starweary—hesitated at the drive
as the *Argo* met the atmosphere at a
combustible descent,
and Earth, less indecisively, reclaimed her own:
from ashes to ashes to the high plains of Kansas.

Blank eyes disbelieving, * Eyes upturned against the night,
he watched cold, * he put his arm around his son
grey metal * and made the same, old wish
turn to cinnabar. * on a shooting star.

—Kenneth Hill

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by Lucius Shepard

R&R

art: J.K. Potter

Lucius Shepard returns to our pages with a powerful science fiction war story set in a war-torn Central America. Although this fascinating and eerily beautiful tale contains brief scenes and language which may be disturbing to some, it is a story which, given today's precarious political balance, should not be put aside.

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One of the new Sikorsky gunships, an element of the First Air Cavalry with the words Whispering Death painted on its side, gave Mingolla and Gilbey and Baylor a lift from the Ant Farm to San Francisco de Juticlan, a small town located inside the green zone which on the latest maps was designated Free Occupied Guatemala. To the east of this green zone lay an undesignated band of yellow that crossed the country from the Mexican border to the Caribbean. The Ant Farm was a firebase on the eastern edge of the yellow band, and it was from there that Mingolla—an artillery specialist not yet twenty-one years old—lobbed shells into an area which the maps depicted in black and white terrain markings. And thus it was that he often thought of himself as engaged in a struggle to keep the world safe for primary colors.

Mingolla and his buddies could have taken their r&r in Rió or Caracas, but they had noticed that the men who visited these cities had a tendency to grow careless upon their return; they understood from this that the more exuberant your r&r, the more likely you were to wind up a casualty, and so they always opted for the lesser distractions of the Guatemalan towns. They were not really friends: they had little in common, and under different circumstances they might well have been enemies. But taking their r&r together had come to be a ritual of survival, and once they had reached the town of their choice, they would go their separate ways and perform further rituals. Because they had survived so much already, they believed that if they continued to perform these same rituals they would complete their tours unscathed. They had never acknowledged their belief to one another, speaking of it only obliquely—that, too, was part of the ritual—and had this belief been challenged they would have admitted its irrationality; yet they would also have pointed out that the strange character of the war acted to enforce it.

The gunship set down at an airbase a mile west of town, a cement strip penned in on three sides by barracks and offices, with the jungle rising behind them. At the center of the strip another Sikorsky was practicing take-offs and landings—a drunken, camouflage-colored dragonfly—and two others were hovering overhead like anxious parents. As Mingolla jumped out a hot breeze fluttered his shirt. He was wearing civvies for the first time in weeks, and they felt flimsy compared to his combat gear; he glanced around, nervous, half-expecting an unseen enemy to take advantage of his exposure. Some mechanics were lounging in the shade of a chopper whose cockpit had been destroyed, leaving fanglike shards of plastic curving from the charred metal. Dusty jeeps trundled back and forth between the buildings; a brace of crisply starched lieutenants were making a brisk beeline toward a fork-lift stacked high with aluminum

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coffins. Afternoon sunlight fired dazzles on the seams and handles of the coffins, and through the heat haze the distant line of barracks shifted like waves in a troubled olive-drab sea. The incongruity of the scene—its What's-Wrong-With-This-Picture mix of the horrid and the commonplace—wrenched at Mingolla. His left hand trembled, and the light seemed to grow brighter, making him weak and vague. He leaned against the Sikorsky's rocket pod to steady himself. Far above, contrails were fraying in the deep blue range of the sky: XL-16s off to blow holes in Nicaragua. He stared after them with something akin to longing, listening for their engines, but heard only the spacy whisper of the Sikorskys.

Gilbey hopped down from the hatch that led to the computer deck behind the cockpit; he brushed imaginary dirt from his jeans and sauntered over to Mingolla and stood with hands on hips: a short muscular kid whose blond crewcut and petulant mouth gave him the look of a grumpy child. Baylor stuck his head out of the hatch and worriedly scanned the horizon. Then he, too, hopped down. He was tall and rawboned, a couple of years older than Mingolla, with lank black hair and pimply olive skin and features so sharp that they appeared to have been hatcheted into shape. He rested a hand on the side of the Sikorsky, but almost instantly, noticing that he was touching the flaming letter W in Whispering Death, he jerked the hand away as if he'd been scorched. Three days before there had been an all-out assault on the Ant Farm, and Baylor had not recovered from it. Neither had Mingolla. It was hard to tell whether or not Gilbey had been affected.

One of the Sikorsky's pilots cracked the cockpit door. "Y'all can catch a ride into 'Frisco at the PX," he said, his voice muffled by the black bubble of his visor. The sun shined a white blaze on the visor, making it seem that the helmet contained night and a single star.

"Where's the PX?" asked Gilbey.

The pilot said something too muffled to be understood.

"What?" said Gilbey.

Again the pilot's response was muffled, and Gilbey became angry. "Take that damn thing off!" he said.

"This?" The pilot pointed to his visor. "What for?"

"So I can hear what the hell you sayin'."

"You can hear now, can'tcha?"

"Okay," said Gilbey, his voice tight. "Where's the goddamn PX?"

The pilot's reply was unintelligible; his faceless mask regarded Gilbey with inscrutable intent.

Gilbey balled up his fists. "Take that son of a bitch off!"

"Can't do it, soldier," said the second pilot, leaning over so that the two black bubbles were nearly side by side. "These here doobies"—he

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tapped his visor—"they got micro-circuits that beams shit into our eyes. 'Fects the optic nerve. Makes it so we can see the beaners even when they undercover. Longer we wear 'em, the better we see."

Baylor laughed edgily, and Gilbey said, "Bull!" Mingolla naturally assumed that the pilots were putting Gilbey on, or else their reluctance to remove the helmets stemmed from a superstition, perhaps from a deluded belief that the visors actually did bestow special powers. But given a war in which combat drugs were issued and psychics predicted enemy movements, anything was possible, even micro-circuits that enhanced vision.

"You don't wanna see us, nohow," said the first pilot. "The beams mess up our faces. We're deformed-lookin' mothers."

" 'Course you might not notice the changes," said the second pilot. "Lotsa people don't. But if you did, it'd mess you up."

Imagining the pilots' deformities sent a sick chill mounting from Mingolla's stomach. Gilbey, however, wasn't buying it. "You think I'm stupid?" he shouted, his neck reddening.

"Naw," said the first pilot. "We can *see* you ain't stupid. We can see lotsa stuff other people can't, 'cause of the beams."

"All kindsa weird stuff," chipped in the second pilot. "Like souls."

"Ghosts."

"Even the future."

"The future's our best thing," said the first pilot. "You guys wanna know what's ahead, we'll tell you."

They nodded in unison, the blaze of sunlight sliding across both visors: two evil robots responding to the same program.

Gilbey lunged for the cockpit door. The first pilot slammed it shut, and Gilbey pounded on the plastic, screaming curses. The second pilot flipped a switch on the control console, and a moment later his amplified voice boomed out: "Make straight past that fork-lift 'til you hit the barracks. You'll run right into the PX."

It took both Mingolla and Baylor to drag Gilbey away from the Sikorsky, and he didn't stop shouting until they drew near the fork-lift with its load of coffins: a giant's treasure of enormous silver ingots. Then he grew silent and lowered his eyes. They wangled a ride with an MP corporal outside the PX, and as the jeep hummed across the cement, Mingolla glanced over at the Sikorsky that had transported them. The two pilots had spread a canvas on the ground, had stripped to shorts and were sunning themselves. But they had not removed their helmets. The weird juxtaposition of tanned bodies and shiny black heads disturbed Mingolla, reminding him of an old movie in which a guy had gone through a matter transmitter along with a fly and had ended up with the fly's

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head on his shoulders. Maybe, he thought, the helmets were like that, impossible to remove. Maybe the war had gotten that strange.

The MP corporal noticed him watching the pilots and let out a barking laugh. "Those guys," he said, with the flat emphatic tone of a man who knew whereof he spoke, "are fuckin' nuts!"

Six years before, San Francisco de Juticlan had been a scatter of thatched huts and concrete block structures deployed among palms and banana leaves on the east bank of the Rió Dulce, at the junction of the river and a gravel road that connected with the Pan American Highway; but it had since grown to occupy substantial sections of both banks, increased by dozens of bars and brothels: stucco cubes painted all the colors of the rainbow, with a fantastic bestiary of neon signs mounted atop their tin roofs. Dragons; unicorns; fiery birds; centaurs. The MP corporal told Mingolla that the signs were not advertisements but coded symbols of pride; for example, from the representation of a winged red tiger crouched amidst green lilies and blue crosses, you could deduce that the owner was wealthy, a member of a Catholic secret society, and ambivalent toward government policies. Old signs were constantly being dismantled, and larger, more ornate ones erected in their stead as testament to improved profits, and this warfare of light and image was appropriate to the time and place, because San Francisco de Juticlan was less a town than a symptom of war. Though by night the sky above it was radiant, at ground level it was mean and squalid. Pariah dogs foraged in piles of garbage, hardbitten whores spat from the windows, and according to the corporal, it was not unusual to stumble across a corpse, probably a victim of the gangs of abandoned children who lived in the fringes of the jungle. Narrow streets of tawny dirt cut between the bars, carpeted with a litter of flattened cans and feces and broken glass; refugees begged at every corner, displaying burns and bullet wounds. Many of the buildings had been thrown up with such haste that their walls were tilted, their roofs canted, and this made the shadows they cast appear exaggerated in their jaggedness, like shadows in the work of a psychotic artist, giving visual expression to a pervasive undercurrent of tension. Yet as Mingolla moved along, he felt at ease, almost happy. His mood was due in part to his hunch that it was going to be one hell of an r&r (he had learned to trust his hunches); but it mainly spoke to the fact that towns like this had become for him a kind of afterlife, a reward for having endured a harsh term of existence.

The corporal dropped them off at a drugstore, where Mingolla bought a box of stationery, and then they stopped for a drink at the Club Demonio: a tiny place whose whitewashed walls were shined to faint phosphorescence by the glare of purple light bulbs dangling from the ceiling

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like radioactive fruit. The club was packed with soldiers and whores, most sitting at tables around a dance floor not much bigger than a king-size mattress. Two couples were swaying to a ballad that welled from a jukebox encaged in chicken wire and two-by-fours; veils of cigarette smoke drifted with underwater slowness above their heads. Some of the soldiers were mauling their whores, and one whore was trying to steal the wallet of a soldier who was on the verge of passing out; her hand worked between his legs, encouraging him to thrust his hips forward, and when he did this, with her other hand she pried at the wallet stuck in the back pocket of his tight-fitting jeans. But all the action seemed listless, half-hearted, as if the dimness and syrupy music had thickened the air and were hampering movement. Mingolla took a seat at the bar. The bartender glanced at him inquiringly, his pupils becoming cored with purple reflections, and Mingolla said, "Beer."

"Hey, check that out!" Gilbey slid onto an adjoining stool and jerked his thumb toward a whore at the end of the bar. Her skirt was hiked to mid-thigh, and her breasts, judging by their fullness and lack of sag, were likely the product of elective surgery.

"Nice," said Mingolla, disinterested. The bartender set a bottle of beer in front of him, and he had a swig; it tasted sour, watery, like a distillation of the stale air.

Baylor slumped onto the stool next to Gilbey and buried his face in his hands. Gilbey said something to him that Mingolla didn't catch, and Baylor lifted his head. "I ain't goin' back," he said.

"Aw, Jesus!" said Gilbey. "Don't start that crap."

In the half-dark Baylor's eye sockets were clotted with shadows. His stare locked onto Mingolla. "They'll get us next time," he said. "We should head downriver. They got boats in Livingston that'll take you to Panama."

"Panama!" sneered Gilbey. "Nothin' there 'cept more beaners."

"We'll be okay at the Farm," offered Mingolla. "Things get too heavy, they'll pull us back."

" 'Too heavy?' " A vein throbbed in Baylor's temple. "What the fuck you call 'too heavy?' "

"Screw this!" Gilbey heaved up from his stool. "You deal with him, man," he said to Mingolla; he gestured at the big-breasted whore. "I'm gonna climb Mount Silicon."

"Nine o'clock," said Mingolla. "The PX. Okay?"

Gilbey said, "Yeah," and moved off. Baylor took over his stool and leaned close to Mingolla. "You know I'm right," he said in an urgent whisper. "They almost got us this time."

"Air Cav'll handle 'em," said Mingolla, affecting nonchalance. He opened the box of stationery and unclipped a pen from his shirt pocket.

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"You *know* I'm right," Baylor repeated.

Mingolla tapped the pen against his lips, pretending to be distracted.

"Air Cav!" said Baylor with a despairing laugh. "Air Cav ain't gonna do squat!"

"Why don't you put on some decent tunes?" Mingolla suggested. "See if they got any Prowler on the box."

"Dammit!" Baylor grabbed his wrist. "Don't you understand, man? This shit ain't workin' no more!"

Mingolla shook him off. "Maybe you need some change," he said coldly; he dug out a handful of coins and tossed them on the counter. "There! There's some change."

"I'm tellin' you . . ."

"I don't wanna hear it!" snapped Mingolla.

"You don't wanna hear it?" said Baylor, incredulous. He was on the verge of losing control. His dark face slick with sweat, one eyelid fluttering. He pounded the countertop for emphasis. "Man, you better hear it! 'Cause we don't pull somethin' together soon, *real* soon, we're gonna die! You hear that, don'tcha?"

Mingolla caught him by the shirtfront. "Shut up!"

"I ain't shuttin' up!" Baylor shrilled. "You and Gilbey, man, you think you can save your ass by stickin' your head in the sand. But I'm gonna make you listen." He threw back his head, his voice rose to a shout. "We're gonna die!"

The way he shouted it—almost gleefully, like a kid yelling a dirty word to spite his parents—pissed Mingolla off. He was sick of Baylor's scenes. Without planning it, he punched him, pulling the punch at the last instant. Kept a hold of his shirt and clipped him on the jaw, just enough to rock back his head. Baylor blinked at him, stunned, his mouth open. Blood seeped from his gums. At the opposite end of the counter, the bartender was leaning beside a choirlike arrangement of liquor bottles, watching Mingolla and Baylor, and some of the soldiers were watching, too: they looked pleased, as if they had been hoping for a spot of violence to liven things up. Mingolla felt debased by their attentiveness, ashamed of his bullying. "Hey, I'm sorry, man," he said. "I . . ."

"I don't give a shit 'bout you're sorry," said Baylor, rubbing his mouth. "Don't give a shit 'bout nothin' 'cept gettin' the hell outta here."

"Leave it alone, all right?"

But Baylor wouldn't leave it alone. He continued to argue, adopting the long-suffering tone of someone carrying on bravely in the face of great injustice. Mingolla tried to ignore him by studying the label on his beer bottle: a red and black graphic portraying a Guatemalan soldier, his rifle upheld in victory. It was an attractive design, putting him in mind of the poster work he had done before being drafted; but considering

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the unreliability of Guatemalan troops, the heroic pose was a joke. He gouged a trench through the center of the label with his thumbnail.

At last Baylor gave it up and sat staring down at the warped veneer of the counter. Mingolla let him sit a minute; then, without shifting his gaze from the bottle, he said, "Why don't you put on some decent tunes?"

Baylor tucked his chin onto his chest, maintaining a stubborn silence.

"It's your only option, man," Mingolla went on. "What else you gonna do?"

"You're crazy," said Baylor; he flicked his eyes toward Mingolla and hissed it like a curse. "Crazy!"

"You gonna take off for Panama by yourself? Un-unh. You know the three of us got something going. We come this far together, and if you just hang tough, we'll go home together."

"I don't know," said Baylor. "I don't know anymore."

"Look at it this way," said Mingolla. "Maybe we're all three of us right. Maybe Panama *is* the answer, but the time just isn't ripe. If that's true, me and Gilbey will see it sooner or later."

With a heavy sigh, Baylor got to his feet. "You ain't never gonna see it, man," he said dejectedly.

Mingolla had a swallow of beer. "Check if they got any Prowler on the box. I could relate to some Prowler."

Baylor stood for a moment, indecisive. He started for the jukebox, then veered toward the door. Mingolla tensed, preparing to run after him. But Baylor stopped and walked back over to the bar. Lines of strain were etched deep in his forehead. "Okay," he said, a catch in his voice. "Okay. What time tomorrow? Nine o'clock?"

"Right," said Mingolla, turning away. "The PX."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Baylor cross the room and bend over the jukebox to inspect the selections. He felt relieved. This was the way all their r&rs had begun, with Gilbey chasing a whore and Baylor feeding the jukebox, while he wrote a letter home. On their first r&r he had written his parents about the war and its bizarre forms of attrition; then, realizing that the letter would alarm his mother, he had torn it up and written another, saying merely that he was fine. He would tear this letter up as well, but he wondered how his father would react if he were to read it. Most likely with anger. His father was a firm believer in God and country, and though Mingolla understood the futility of adhering to any moral code in light of the insanity around him, he had found that something of his father's tenets had been ingrained in him: he would never be able to desert as Baylor kept insisting. He knew it wasn't that simple, that other factors, too, were responsible for his devotion to duty; but since his father would have been happy to accept the responsibility, Mingolla tended to blame it on him. He tried to picture what his parents

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were doing at that moment—father watching the Mets on TV, mother puttering in the garden—and then, holding those images in mind, he began to write.

"Dear Mom and Dad,

In your last letter you asked if I thought we were winning the war. Down here you'd get a lot of blank stares in response to that question, because most people have a perspective on the war to which the overall result isn't relevant. Like there's a guy I know who has this rap about how the war is a magical operation of immense proportions, how the movements of the planes and troops are inscribing a mystical sign on the surface of reality, and to survive you have to figure out your location within the design and move accordingly. I'm sure that sounds crazy to you, but down here everyone's crazy the same way (some shrink's actually done a study on the incidence of superstition among the occupation forces). They're looking for a magic that will ensure their survival. You may find it hard to believe that I subscribe to this sort of thing, but I do. I carve my initials on the shell casings, wear parrot feathers inside my helmet . . . and a lot more.

"To get back to your question, I'll try to do better than a blank stare, but I can't give you a simple Yes or No. The matter can't be summed up that neatly. But I can illustrate the situation by telling you a story and let you draw your own conclusions. There are hundreds of stories that would do, but the one that comes to mind now concerns the Lost Patrol . . ."

A Prowler tune blasted from the jukebox, and Mingolla broke off writing to listen: it was a furious, jittery music, fueled—it seemed—by the same aggressive paranoia that had generated the war. People shoved back chairs, overturned tables and began dancing in the vacated spaces; they were crammed together, able to do no more than shuffle in rhythm, but their tread set the light bulbs jiggling at the end of their cords, the purple glare slopping over the walls. A slim acne-scarred whore came to dance in front of Mingolla, shaking her breasts, holding out her arms to him. Her face was corpse-pale in the unsteady light, her smile a dead leer. Trickling from one eye, like some exquisite secretion of death, was a black tear of sweat and mascara. Mingolla couldn't be sure he was seeing her right. His left hand started trembling, and for a couple of seconds the entire scene lost its cohesiveness. Everything looked scattered, unrecognizable, embedded in a separate context from everything else: a welter of meaningless objects bobbing up and down on a tide of deranged music. Then somebody opened the door, admitting a wedge of

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sunlight, and the room settled back to normal. Scowling, the whore danced away. Mingolla breathed easier. The tremors in his hand subsided. He spotted Baylor near the door talking to a scruffy Guatemalan guy . . . probably a coke connection. Coke was Baylor's panacea, his remedy for fear and desperation. He always returned from r&r bleary-eyed and prone to nosebleeds, boasting about the great dope he'd scored. Pleased that he was following routine, Mingolla went back to his letter.

". . . Remember me telling you that the Green Berets took drugs to make them better fighters? Most everyone calls the drugs 'Sammy,' which is short for 'samurai.' They come in ampule form, and when you pop them under your nose, for the next thirty minutes or so you feel like a cross between a Medal-of-Honor winner and Superman. The trouble is that a lot of Berets overdo them and flip out. They sell them on the black market, too, and some guys use them for sport. They take the ampules and fight each other in pits . . . like human cockfights.

"Anyway, about two years ago a patrol of Berets went on patrol up in Fire Zone Emerald, not far from my base, and they didn't come back. They were listed MIA. A month or so after they'd disappeared, somebody started ripping off ampules from various dispensaries. At first the crimes were chalked up to guerrillas, but then a doctor caught sight of the robbers and said they were Americans. They were wearing rotted fatigues, acting nuts. An artist did a sketch of their leader according to the doctor's description, and it turned out to be a dead ringer for the sergeant of that missing patrol. After that they were sighted all over the place. Some of the sightings were obviously false, but others sounded like the real thing. They were said to have shot down a couple of our choppers and to have knocked over a supply column near Zacapas.

"I'd never put much stock in the story, to tell you the truth, but about four months ago this infantryman came walking out of the jungle and reported to the firebase. He claimed he'd been captured by the Lost Patrol, and when I heard his story, I believed him. He said they had told him that they weren't Americans anymore but citizens of the jungle. They lived like animals, sleeping under palm fronds, popping the ampules night and day. They were crazy, but they'd become geniuses at survival. They knew everything about the jungle. When the weather was going to change, what animals were near. And they had this weird religion based on the beams of light that would shine down through the canopy. They'd sit under those beams, like saints being blessed by God, and rave about the purity

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of the light, the joys of killing, and the new world they were going to build.

"So that's what occurs to me when you ask your questions, mom and dad. The Lost Patrol. I'm not attempting to be circumspect in order to make a point about the horrors of war. Not at all. When I think about the Lost Patrol I'm not thinking about how sad and crazy they are. I'm wondering what it is they see in that light, wondering if it might be of help to me. And maybe therein lies your answer . . ."

It was coming on sunset by the time Mingolla left the bar to begin the second part of his ritual, to wander innocent as a tourist through the native quarter, partaking of whatever fell to hand, maybe having dinner with a Guatemalan family, or buddying up with a soldier from another outfit and going to church, or hanging out with some young guys who'd ask him about America. He had done each of these things on previous r&rs, and his pretense of innocence always amused him. If he were to follow his inner directives, he would burn out the horrors of the firebase with whores and drugs; but on that first r&r—stunned by the experience of combat and needing solitude—a protracted walk had been his course of action, and he was committed not only to repeating it but also to recapturing his dazed mental set: it would not do to half-ass the ritual. In this instance, given recent events at the Ant Farm, he did not have to work very hard to achieve confusion.

The Rio Dulce was a wide blue river, heaving with a light chop. Thick jungle hedged its banks, and yellowish reed beds grew out from both shores. At the spot where the gravel road ended was a concrete pier, and moored to it a barge that served as a ferry; it was already loaded with its full complement of vehicles—two trucks—and carried about thirty pedestrians. Mingolla boarded and stood in the stern beside three infantrymen who were still wearing their combat suits and helmets, holding double-barreled rifles that were connected by flexible tubing to backpack computers; through their smoked faceplates he could see green reflections from the read-outs on their visor displays. They made him uneasy, reminding him of the two pilots, and he felt better after they had removed their helmets and proved to have normal human faces. Spanning a third of the way across the river was a sweeping curve of white cement supported by slender columns, like a piece fallen out of a Dali landscape: a bridge upon which construction had been halted. Mingolla had noticed it from the air just before landing and hadn't thought much about it; but now the sight took him by storm. It seemed less an unfinished bridge than a monument to some exalted ideal, more beautiful than any finished bridge could be. And as he stood rapt, with the ferry's oily smoke farting

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out around him, he sensed there was an analogue of that beautiful curving shape inside him, that he, too, was a road ending in mid-air. It gave him confidence to associate himself with such loftiness and purity, and for a moment he let himself believe that he also might have—as the upward-angled terminus of the bridge implied—a point of completion lying far beyond the one anticipated by the architects of his fate.

On the west bank past the town the gravel road was lined with stalls: skeletal frameworks of brushwood poles roofed with palm thatch. Children chased in and out among them, pretending to aim and fire at each other with stalks of sugar cane. But hardly any soldiers were in evidence. The crowds that moved along the road were composed mostly of Indians: young couples too shy to hold hands; old men who looked lost and poked litter with their canes; dumpy matrons who made outraged faces at the high prices; shoeless farmers who kept their backs ramrod-straight and wore grave expressions and carried their money knotted in handkerchiefs. At one of the stalls Mingolla bought a sandwich and a Coca Cola. He sat on a stool and ate contentedly, relishing the hot bread and the spicy fish cooked inside it, watching the passing parade. Gray clouds were bulking up and moving in from the south, from the Caribbean; now and then a flight of XL-16s would arrow northward toward the oil fields beyond Lake Ixtabal, where the fighting was very bad. Twilight fell. The lights of the town began to be picked out sharply against the empurpling air. Guitars were plucked, hoarse voices sang, the crowds thinned. Mingolla ordered another sandwich and Coke. He leaned back, sipped and chewed, steeping himself in the good magic of the land, the sweetness of the moment. Beside the sandwich stall, four old women were squatting by a cooking fire, preparing chicken stew and corn fritters; scraps of black ash drifted up from the flames, and as twilight deepened, it seemed these scraps were the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that were fitting together overhead into the image of a starless night.

Darkness closed in, the crowds thickened again, and Mingolla continued his walk, strolling past stalls with necklaces of light bulbs strung along their frames, wires leading off them to generators whose rattle drowned out the chirring of frogs and crickets. Stalls selling plastic rosaries, Chinese switchblades, tin lanterns; others selling embroidered Indian shirts, flour-sack trousers, wooden masks; others yet where old men in shabby suit coats sat cross-legged behind pyramids of tomatoes and melons and green peppers, each with a candle cemented in melted wax atop them, like primitive altars. Laughter, shrieks, vendors shouting. Mingolla breathed in perfume, charcoal smoke, the scents of rotting fruit. He began to idle from stall to stall, buying a few souvenirs for friends back in New York, feeling part of the hustle, the noise, the shining black air, and eventually he came to a stall around which forty or

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fifty people had gathered, blocking all but its thatched roof from view. A woman's amplified voice cried out, *"LA MARIPOSA!"* Excited squeals from the crowd. Again the woman cried out, *"EL CUCHILLO!"* The two words she had called—the butterfly and the knife—intrigued Mingolla, and he peered over heads.

Framed by the thatch and rickety poles, a dusky-skinned young woman was turning a handle that spun a wire cage: it was filled with white plastic cubes, bolted to a plank counter. Her black hair was pulled back from her face, tied behind her neck, and she wore a red sundress that left her shoulders bare. She stopped cranking, reached into the cage and without looking plucked one of the cubes; she examined it, picked up a microphone and cried, *"LA LUNA!"* A bearded guy pushed forward and handed her a card. She checked the card, comparing it to some cubes that were lined up on the counter; then she gave the bearded guy a few bills in Guatemalan currency.

The composition of the game appealed to Mingolla. The dark woman; her red dress and cryptic words; the runelike shadow of the wire cage; all this seemed magical, an image out of an occult dream. Part of the crowd moved off, accompanying the winner, and Mingolla let himself be forced closer by new arrivals pressing in from behind. He secured a position at the corner of the stall, fought to maintain it against the eddying of the crowd, and on glancing up, he saw the woman smiling at him from a couple of feet away, holding out a card and a pencil stub. "Only ten cents Guatemalan," she said in American-sounding English.

The people flanking Mingolla urged him to play, grinning and clapping him on the back. But he didn't need urging. He knew he was going to win: it was the clearest premonition he had ever had, and it was signaled mostly by the woman herself. He felt a powerful attraction to her. It was as if she were a source of heat . . . not of heat alone but also of vitality, sensuality, and now that he was within range, that heat was washing over him, making him aware of a sexual tension developing between them, bringing with it the knowledge that he would win. The strength of the attraction surprised him, because his first impression had been that she was exotic-looking but not beautiful. Though slim, she was a little wide-hipped, and her breasts, mounded high and served up in separate scoops by her tight bodice, were quite small. Her face, like her coloring, had an East Indian cast, its features too large and voluptuous to suit the delicate bone structure; yet they were so expressive, so finely cut, that their disproportion came to seem a virtue. Except that it was thinner, it might have been the face of one of those handmaidens you see on Hindu religious posters, kneeling beneath Krishna's throne. Very sexy, very serene. That serenity, Mingolla decided, wasn't just a veneer. It ran deep. But at the moment he was more interested in her breasts.

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They looked nice pushed up like that, gleaming with a sheen of sweat. Two helpings of shaky pudding.

The woman waggled the card, and he took it: a simplified Bingo card with symbols instead of letters and numbers. "Good luck," she said, and laughed, as if in reaction to some private irony. Then she began to spin the cage.

Mingolla didn't recognize many of the words she called, but an old man cozied up to him and pointed to the appropriate square whenever he got a match. Soon several rows were almost complete. *"LA MANZANA!"* cried the woman, and the old man tugged at Mingolla's sleeve, shouting, *"Se gano!"*

As the woman checked his card, Mingolla thought about the mystery she presented. Her calmness, her unaccented English and the upper class background it implied, made her seem out of place here. Maybe she was a student, her education interrupted by the war . . . though she might be a bit too old for that. He figured her to be twenty-two or twenty-three. Graduate school, maybe. But there was an air of worldliness about her that didn't support that theory. He watched her eyes dart back and forth between the card and the plastic cubes. Large, heavy-lidded eyes. The whites stood in such sharp contrast to her dusky skin that they looked fake: milky stones with black centers.

"You see?" she said, handing him his winnings—about three dollars—and another card.

"See what?" Mingolla asked, perplexed.

But she had already begun to spin the cage again.

He won three of the next seven cards. People congratulated him, shaking their heads in amazement; the old man cozied up further, suggesting in sign language that he was the agency responsible for Mingolla's good fortune. Mingolla, however, was nervous. His ritual was founded on a principle of small miracles, and though he was certain the woman was cheating on his behalf (that, he assumed, had been the meaning of her laughter, her "You see?"), though his luck was not really luck, its excessiveness menaced that principle. He lost three cards in a row, but thereafter won two of four and grew even more nervous. He considered leaving. But what if it *were* luck? Leaving might run him afoul of a higher principle, interfere with some cosmic process and draw down misfortune. It was a ridiculous idea, but he couldn't bring himself to risk the faint chance that it might be true.

He continued to win. The people who had congratulated him became disgruntled and drifted off, and when there were only a handful of players left, the woman closed down the game. A grimy street kid materialized from the shadows and began dismantling the equipment. Unbolting the wire cage, unplugging the microphone, boxing up the plastic cubes, stuff-

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ing it all into a burlap sack. The woman moved out from behind the stall and leaned against one of the roofpoles. Half-smiling, she cocked her head, appraising Mingolla, and then—just as the silence between them began to get prickly—she said, "My name's Debora."

"David." Mingolla felt as awkward as a fourteen-year-old; he had to resist the urge to jam his hands into his pockets and look away. "Why'd you cheat?" he asked; in trying to cover his nervousness, he said it too loudly and it sounded like an accusation.

"I wanted to get your attention," she said. "I'm . . . interested in you. Didn't you notice?"

"I didn't want to take it for granted."

She laughed. "I approve! It's always best to be cautious."

He liked her laughter; it had an easiness that made him think she would celebrate the least good thing.

Three men passed by arm-in-arm, singing drunkenly. One yelled at Debora, and she responded with an angry burst of Spanish. Mingolla could guess what had been said, that she had been insulted for associating with an American. "Maybe we should go somewhere," he said. "Get off the streets."

"After he's finished." She gestured at the kid, who was now taking down the string of light bulbs. "It's funny," she said. "I have the gift myself, and I'm usually uncomfortable around anyone else who has it. But not with you."

"The gift?" Mingolla thought he knew what she was referring to, but was leery about admitting to it.

"What do you call it? ESP?"

He gave up the idea of denying it. "I never put a name on it," he said.

"It's strong in you. I'm surprised you're not with Psicorp."

He wanted to impress her, to cloak himself in a mystery equal to hers. "How do you know I'm not?"

"I could tell." She pulled a black purse from behind the counter. "After drug therapy there's a change in the gift, in the way it comes across. It doesn't feel as hot, for one thing." She glanced up from the purse. "Or don't you perceive it that way? As heat."

"I've been around people who felt hot to me," he said. "But I didn't know what it meant."

"That's what it means . . . sometimes." She stuffed some bills into the purse. "So, why aren't you with Psicorp?"

Mingolla thought back to his first interview with a Psicorp agent: a pale, balding man with the innocent look around the eyes that some blind people have. While Mingolla had talked, the agent had fondled the ring Mingolla had given him to hold, paying no mind to what was being said, and had gazed off distractedly, as if listening for echoes. "They tried

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hard to recruit me," Mingolla said. "But I was scared of the drugs. I heard they had bad side-effects."

"You're lucky it was voluntary," she said. "Here they just snap you up."

The kid said something to her; he swung the burlap sack over his shoulder, and after a rapid-fire exchange of Spanish he ran off toward the river. The crowds were still thick, but more than half the stalls had shut down; those that remained open looked—with their thatched roofs and strung lights and beshawled women—like crude nativity scenes ranging the darkness. Beyond the stalls, neon signs winked on and off: a chaotic menagerie of silver eagles and crimson spiders and indigo dragons. Watching them burn and vanish, Mingolla experienced a wave of dizziness. Things were starting to look disconnected as they had at the Club Demonio.

"Don't you feel well?" she asked.

"I'm just tired."

She turned him to face her, put her hands on his shoulders. "No," she said. "It's something else."

The weight of her hands, the smell of her perfume, helped to steady him. "There was an assault on the firebase a few days ago," he said. "It's still with me a little, y'know."

She gave his shoulders a squeeze and stepped back. "Maybe I can do something." She said this with such gravity, he thought she must have something specific in mind. "How's that?" he asked.

"I'll tell you at dinner . . . that is, if you're buying." She took his arm, jollying him. "You owe me that much, don't you think, after all your good luck?"

"Why aren't *you* with Psicorp?" he asked as they walked.

She didn't answer immediately, keeping her head down, nudging a scrap of cellophane with her toe. They were moving along an uncrowded street, bordered on the left by the river—a channel of sluggish black lacquer—and on the right by the windowless rear walls of some bars. Overhead, behind a latticework of supports, a neon lion shed a baleful green nimbus. "I was in school in Miami when they started testing here," she said at last. "And after I came home, my family got on the wrong side of Department Six. You know Department Six?"

"I've heard some stuff."

"Sadists don't make efficient bureaucrats," she said. "They were more interested in torturing us than in determining our value."

Their footsteps crunched in the dirt; husky jukebox voices cried out for love from the next street over. "What happened?" Mingolla asked.

"To my family?" She shrugged. "Dead. No one ever bothered to confirm

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it, but it wasn't necessary. Confirmation, I mean." She went a few steps in silence. "As for me . . ." A muscle bunched at the corner of her mouth. "I did what I had to."

He was tempted to ask for specifics, but thought better of it. "I'm sorry," he said, and then kicked himself for having made such a banal comment.

They passed a bar lorded over by a grinning red-and-purple neon ape. Mingolla wondered if these glowing figures had meaning for guerrillas with binoculars in the hills: gone-dead tubes signaling times of attack or troop movements. He cocked an eye toward Debora. She didn't look despondent as she had a second before, and that accorded with his impression that her calmness was a product of self-control, that her emotions were strong but held in tight check and only let out for exercise. From out on the river came a solitary splash, some cold fleck of life surfacing briefly, then returning to its long ignorant glide through the dark . . . and his life no different really, though maybe less graceful. How strange it was to be walking beside this woman who gave off heat like a candle-flame, with earth and sky blended into a black gas, and neon totems standing guard overhead.

"Shit," said Debora under her breath.

It surprised him to hear her curse. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she said wearily. "Just 'shit.' " She pointed ahead and quickened her pace. "Here we are."

The restaurant was a working-class place that occupied the ground floor of a hotel: a two-story building of yellow concrete block with a buzzing Fanta sign hung above the entrance. Hundreds of moths swarmed about the sign, flickering whitely against the darkness, and in front of the steps stood a group of teenage boys who were throwing knives at an iguana. The iguana was tied by its hind legs to the step railing. It had amber eyes, a hide the color of boiled cabbage, and it strained at the end of its cord, digging its claws into the dirt and arching its neck like a pint-size dragon about to take flight. As Mingolla and Debora walked up, one of the boys scored a hit in the iguana's tail and it flipped high into the air, shaking loose the knife. The boys passed around a bottle of rum to celebrate.

Except for the waiter—a pudgy young guy leaning beside a door that opened onto a smoke-filled kitchen—the place was empty. Glaring overhead lights shined up the grease spots on the plastic tablecloths and made the uneven thicknesses of yellow paint appear to be dripping. The cement floor was freckled with dark stains that Mingolla discovered to be the remains of insects. However, the food turned out to be pretty good, and Mingolla shoveled down a plateful of chicken and rice before Debora had half-finished hers. She ate deliberately, chewing each bite a long time, and he had to carry the conversation. He told her about New York,

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his painting, how a couple of galleries had showed interest even though he was just a student. He compared his work to Rauschenberg, to Silvestre. Not as good, of course. Not yet. He had the notion that everything he told her—no matter its irrelevance to the moment—was securing the relationship, establishing subtle ties: he pictured the two of them enwebbed in a network of luminous threads that acted as conduits for their attraction. He could feel her heat more strongly than ever, and he wondered what it would be like to make love to her, to be swallowed by that perception of heat. The instant he wondered this, she glanced up and smiled, as if sharing the thought. He wanted to ratify his sense of intimacy, to tell her something he had told no one else, and so—having only one important secret—he told her about the ritual.

She laid down her fork and gave him a penetrating look. "You can't really believe that," she said.

"I know it sounds . . ."

"Ridiculous," she broke in. "That's how it sounds."

"It's the truth," he said defiantly.

She picked up her fork again, pushed around some grains of rice. "How is it for you," she said, "when you have a premonition? I mean, what happens? Do you have dreams, hear voices?"

"Sometimes I just know things," he said, taken aback by her abrupt change of subject. "And sometimes I see pictures. It's like with a TV that's not working right. Fuzziness at first, then a sharp image."

"With me, it's dreams. And hallucinations. I don't know what else to call them." Her lips thinned; she sighed, appearing to have reached some decision. "When I first saw you, just for a second, you were wearing battle gear. There were inputs on the gauntlets, cables attached to the helmet. The faceplate was shattered, and your face . . . it was pale, bloody." She put her hand out to cover his. "What I saw was very clear, David. You can't go back."

He hadn't described artilleryman's gear to her, and no way could she have seen it. Shaken, he said, "Where am I gonna go?"

"Panama," she said. "I can help you get there."

She suddenly snapped into focus. You find her, dozens like her, in any of the r&r towns. Preaching pacifism, encouraging desertion. Do-gooders, most with guerrilla connections. And that, he realized, must be how she had known about his gear. She had probably gathered information on the different types of units in order to lend authenticity to her dire pronouncements. His opinion of her wasn't diminished; on the contrary, it went up a notch. She was risking her life by talking to him. But her mystery had been dimmed.

"I can't do that," he said.

"Why not? Don't you believe me?"

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"It wouldn't make any difference if I did."

"I . . ."

"Look," he said. "This friend of mine, he's always trying to convince me to desert, and there've been times I wanted to. But it's just not in me. My feet won't move that way. Maybe you don't understand, but that's how it is."

"This childish thing you do with your two friends," she said after a pause. "That's what's holding you here, isn't it?"

"It isn't childish."

"That's exactly what it is. Like a child walking home in the dark and thinking that if he doesn't look at the shadows, nothing will jump out at him."

"You don't understand," he said.

"No, I suppose I don't." Angry, she threw her napkin down on the table and stared intently at her plate as if reading some oracle from the chicken bones.

"Let's talk about something else," said Mingolla.

"I have to go," she said coldly.

"Because I won't desert?"

"Because of what'll happen if you don't." She leaned toward him, her voice burred with emotion. "Because knowing what I do about your future, I don't want to wind up in bed with you."

Her intensity frightened him. Maybe she *had* been telling the truth. But he dismissed the possibility. "Stay," he said. "We'll talk some more about it."

"You wouldn't listen." She picked up her purse and got to her feet.

The waiter ambled over and laid the check beside Mingolla's plate; he pulled a plastic bag filled with marijuana from his apron pocket and dangled it in front of Mingolla. "Gotta get her in the mood, man," he said. Debora railed at him in Spanish. He shrugged and moved off, his slow-footed walk an advertisement for his goods.

"Meet me tomorrow then," said Mingolla. "We can talk more about it tomorrow."

"No."

"Why don't you gimme a break?" he said. "This is all coming down pretty fast, y'know. I get here this afternoon, meet you, and an hour later you're saying, 'Death is in the cards, and Panama's your only hope.' I need some time to think. Maybe by tomorrow I'll have a different attitude."

Her expression softened but she shook her head, No.

"Don't you think it's worth it?"

She lowered her eyes, fussed with the zipper of her purse a second and let out a rueful hiss. "Where do you want to meet?"

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"How 'bout the pier on this side? 'Round noon."

She hesitated. "All right." She came around to his side of the table, bent down and brushed her lips across his cheek. He tried to pull her close and deepen the kiss, but she slipped away. He felt giddy, overheated. "You really gonna be there?" he asked.

She nodded but seemed troubled, and she didn't look back before vanishing down the steps.

Mingolla sat a while, thinking about the kiss, its promise. He might have sat even longer, but three drunken soldiers staggered in and began knocking over chairs, giving the waiter a hard time. Annoyed, Mingolla went to the door and stood taking in hits of the humid air. Moths were loosely constellated on the curved plastic of the Fanta sign, trying to get next to the bright heat inside it, and he had a sense of relation, of sharing their yearning for the impossible. He started down the steps but was brought up short. The teenage boys had gone; however, their captive iguana lay on the bottom step, bloody and unmoving. Bluish-gray strings spilled from a gash in its throat. It was such a clear sign of bad luck, Mingolla went back inside and checked into the hotel upstairs.

The hotel corridors stank of urine and disinfectant. A drunken Indian with his fly unzipped and a bloody mouth was pounding on one of the doors. As Mingolla passed him, the Indian bowed and made a sweeping gesture, a parody of welcome. Then he went back to his pounding. Mingolla's room was a windowless cell five feet wide and coffin-length, furnished with a sink and a cot and a chair. Cobwebs and dust clotted the glass of the transom, reducing the hallway light to a cold bluish-white glow. The walls were filmy with more cobwebs, and the sheets were so dirty that they looked to have a pattern. He lay down and closed his eyes, thinking about Debora. About ripping off that red dress and giving her a vicious screwing. How she'd cry out. That both made him ashamed and gave him a hard-on. He tried to think about making love to her tenderly. But tenderness, it seemed, was beyond him. He went flaccid. Jerking-off wasn't worth the effort, he decided. He started to unbutton his shirt, remembered the sheets and figured he'd be better off with his clothes on. In the blackness behind his lids he began to see explosive flashes, and within those flashes were images of the assault on the Ant Farm: The mist, the tunnels. He blotted them out with the image of Debora's face, but they kept coming back. Finally he opened his eyes. Two . . . no, three fuzzy-looking black stars were silhouetted against the transom. It was only when they began to crawl that he recognized them to be spiders. Big ones. He wasn't usually afraid of spiders, but these particular spiders terrified him. If he hit them with his shoe he'd break the glass and they'd eject him from the hotel. He didn't want to kill them

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with his hands. After a while he sat up, switched on the overhead and searched under the cot. There weren't any more spiders. He lay back down, feeling shaky and short of breath. Wishing he could talk to someone, hear a familiar voice. "It's okay," he said to the dark air. But that didn't help. And for a long time, until he felt secure enough to sleep, he watched the three black stars crawling across the transom, moving toward the center, touching each other, moving apart, never making any real progress, never straying from their area of bright confinement, their universe of curdled, frozen light.

2

In the morning Mingolla crossed to the west bank and walked toward the airbase. It was already hot, but the air still held a trace of freshness and the sweat that beaded on his forehead felt clean and healthy. White dust was settling along the gravel road, testifying to the recent passage of traffic; past the town and the cut-off that led to the uncompleted bridge, high walls of vegetation crowded close to the road, and from within them he heard monkeys and insects and birds: sharp sounds that enlivened him, making him conscious of the play of his muscles. About halfway to the base he spotted six Guatemalan soldiers coming out of the jungle, dragging a couple of bodies; they tossed them onto the hood of their jeep, where two other bodies were lying. Drawing near, Mingolla saw that the dead were naked children, each with a neat hole in his back. He had intended to walk on past, but one of the soldiers—a gnomish, copper-skinned man in dark blue fatigues—blocked his path and demanded to check his papers. All the soldiers gathered around to study the papers, whispering, turning them sideways, scratching their heads. Used to such hassles, Mingolla paid them no attention and looked at the dead children.

They were scrawny, sun-darkened, lying face down with their ragged hair hanging in a fringe off the hood; their skins were pocked by infected mosquito bites, and the flesh around the bullet holes was ridged-up and bruised. Judging by their size, Mingolla guessed them to be about ten years old; but then he noticed that one was a girl with a teenage fullness to her buttocks, her breasts squashed against the metal. That made him indignant. They were only wild children who survived by robbing and killing, and the Guatemalan soldiers were only doing their duty: they performed a function comparable to that of the birds that hunted ticks on the hide of a rhinoceros, keeping their American beast pest-free and happy. But it wasn't right for the children to be laid out like game.

The soldier gave back Mingolla's papers. He was now all smiles, and—perhaps in the interest of solidifying Guatemalan-American re-

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lations, perhaps because he was proud of his work—he went over to the jeep and lifted the girl's head by the hair so Mingolla could see her face. *"Bandita!"* he said, arranging his features into a comical frown. The girl's face was not unlike the soldier's, with the same blade of a nose and prominent cheekbones. Fresh blood glistened on her lips, and the faded tattoo of a coiled serpent centered her forehead. Her eyes were open, and staring into them—despite their cloudiness—Mingolla felt that he had made a connection, that she was regarding him sadly from somewhere behind those eyes, continuing to die past the point of clinical death. Then an ant crawled out of her nostril, perching on the crimson curve of her lip, and the eyes merely looked vacant. The soldier let her head fall and wrapped his hand in the hair of a second corpse; but before he could lift it, Mingolla turned away and headed down the road toward the airbase.

There was a row of helicopters lined up at the edge of the landing strip, and walking between them, Mingolla saw the two pilots who had given him a ride from the Ant Farm. They were stripped to shorts and helmets, wearing baseball gloves, and they were playing catch, lofting high flies to one another. Behind them, atop their Sikorsky, a mechanic was fussing with the main rotor housing. The sight of the pilots didn't disturb Mingolla as it had the previous day; in fact, he found their weirdness somehow comforting. Just then, the ball eluded one of them and bounced Mingolla's way. He snagged it and flipped it back to the nearer of the pilots, who came loping over and stood pounding the ball into the pocket of his glove. With his black reflecting face and sweaty, muscular torso, he looked like an eager young mutant.

"How's she goin'?" he asked. "Seem like you a little tore down this mornin'."

"I feel okay," said Mingolla defensively. " 'Course"—he smiled, making light of his defensiveness—"maybe you see something I don't."

The pilot shrugged; the sprightliness of the gesture seemed to convey good humor.

Mingolla pointed to the mechanic. "You guys broke down, huh?"

"Just overhaul. We're goin' back up early tomorrow. Need a lift?"

"Naw, I'm here for a week."

An eerie current flowed through Mingolla's left hand, setting up a palsied shaking. It was bad this time, and he jammed the hand into his hip pocket. The olive-drab line of barracks appeared to twitch, to suffer a dislocation and shift farther away; the choppers and jeeps and uniformed men on the strip looked toylike: pieces in a really neat GI Joe Airbase kit. Mingolla's hand beat against the fabric of his trousers like a sick heart.

"I gotta get going," he said.

"Hang in there," said the pilot. "You be awright."

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The words had a flavor of diagnostic assurance that almost convinced Mingolla of the pilot's ability to know his fate, that things such as fate could be known. "You honestly believe what you were saying yesterday, man?" he asked. " 'Bout your helmets? 'Bout knowing the future?"

The pilot bounced the ball on the cement, snatched it at the peak of its rebound and stared down at it. Mingolla could see the seams and brand name reflected in the visor, but nothing of the face behind it, no evidence either of normalcy or deformity. "I get asked that a lot," said the pilot. "People raggin' me, y'know. But you ain't raggin' me, are you, man?"

"No," said Mingolla. "I'm not."

"Well," said the pilot, "it's this way. We buzz 'round up in the nothin', and we see shit down on the ground, shit nobody else sees. Then we blow that shit away. Been doin' it like that for ten months, and we're still alive. Fuckin' A, I believe it!"

Mingolla was disappointed. "Yeah, okay," he said.

"You hear what I'm sayin'?" asked the pilot. "I mean we're livin' goddamn proof."

"Uh-huh." Mingolla scratched his neck, trying to think of a diplomatic response, but thought of none. "Guess I'll see you." He started toward the PX.

"Hang in there, man!" the pilot called after him. "Take it from me! Things gonna be lookin' up for you real soon!"

The canteen in the PX was a big, barnlike room of unpainted boards; it was of such recent construction that Mingolla could still smell sawdust and resin. Thirty or forty tables; a jukebox; bare walls. Behind the bar at the rear of the room, a sour-faced corporal with a clipboard was doing a liquor inventory, and Gilbey—the only customer—was sitting by one of the east windows, stirring a cup of coffee. His brow was furrowed, and a ray of sunlight shone down around him, making it look that he was being divinely inspired to do some soul-searching.

"Where's Baylor?" asked Mingolla, sitting opposite him.

"Fuck, I dunno," said Gilbey, not taking his eyes from the coffee cup. "He'll be here."

Mingolla kept his left hand in his pocket. The tremors were diminishing, but not quickly enough to suit him; he was worried that the shaking would spread as it had after the assault. He let out a sigh, and in letting it out he could feel all his nervous flutters. The ray of sunlight seemed to be humming a wavery golden note, and that, too, worried him. Hallucinations. Then he noticed a fly buzzing against the windowpane. "How was it last night?" he asked.

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Gilbey glanced up sharply. "Oh, you mean Big Tits. She lemme check her for lumps." He forced a grin, then went back to stirring his coffee.

Mingolla was hurt that Gilbey hadn't asked about his night; he wanted to tell him about Debora. But that was typical of Gilbey's self-involvement. His narrow eyes and sulky mouth were the imprints of a mean-spiritedness that permitted few concerns aside from his own well-being. Yet despite his insensitivity, his stupid rages and limited conversation, Mingolla believed that he was smarter than he appeared, that disguising one's intelligence must have been a survival tactic in Detroit, where he had grown up. It was his craftiness that gave him away: his insights into the personalities of adversary lieutenants; his slickness at avoiding unpleasant duty; his ability to manipulate his peers. He wore stupidity like a cloak, and perhaps he had worn it for so long that it could not be removed. Still, Mingolla envied him its virtues, especially the way it had numbed him to the assault.

"He's never been late before," said Mingolla after a while.

"So what he's fuckin' late!" snapped Gilbey, glowering. "He'll be here!"

Behind the bar, the corporal switched on a radio and spun the dial past Latin music, past Top Forty, then past an American voice reporting the baseball scores. "Hey!" called Gilbey. "Let's hear that, man! I wanna see what happened to the Tigers." With a shrug, the corporal complied.

". . . White Sox six, A's three," said the announcer. "That's eight in a row for the Sox . . ."

"White Sox are kickin' some ass," said the corporal, pleased.

"The White Sox!" Gilbey sneered. "What the White Sox got 'cept a buncha beaners hittin' two hunnerd and some coke-sniffin' niggers? Shit! Every spring the White Sox are flyin', man. But then 'long comes summer and the good drugs hit the street and they fuckin' die!"

"Yeah," said the corporal, "but this year . . ."

"Take that son of a bitch Caldwell," said Gilbey, ignoring him. "I seen him coupla years back when he had a trial with the Tigers. Man, that guy could hit! Now he shuffles up there like he's just feelin' the breeze."

"They ain't takin' drugs, man," said the corporal testily. "They can't take 'em 'cause there's these tests that show if they's on somethin'."

Gilbey barreled ahead. "White Sox ain't gotta chance, man! Know what the guy on TV calls 'em sometimes? The Pale Hose! The fuckin' Pale Hose! How you gonna win with a name like that? The Tigers, now, they got the right kinda name. The Yankees, the Braves, the . . ."

"Bullshit, man!" The corporal was becoming upset; he set down his clipboard and walked to the end of the bar. "What 'bout the Dodgers? They gotta wimpy name and they're a good team. Your name don't mean shit!"

"The Reds," suggested Mingolla; he was enjoying Gilbey's rap, its stub-

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bornness and irrationality. Yet at the same time he was concerned by its undertone of desperation: appearances to the contrary, Gilbey was not himself this morning.

"Oh, yeah!" Gilbey smacked the table with the flat of his hand. "The Reds! Lookit the Reds, man! Lookit how good they been doin' since the Cubans come into the war. You think that don't mean nothin'? You think their name ain't helpin' 'em? Even if they get in the Series, the Pale Hose don't gotta prayer against the Reds." He laughed—a hoarse grunt. "I'm a Tiger fan, man, but I gotta feelin' this ain't their year, y'know. The Reds are tearin' up the NL East, and the Yankees is comin' on, and when they get together in October, man, then we gonna find out alla 'bout everything. Alla 'bout fuckin' everything!" His voice grew tight and tremulous. "So don't gimme no trouble 'bout the candyass Pale Hose, man! They ain't shit and they never was and they ain't gonna be shit 'til they change their fuckin' name!"

Sensing danger, the corporal backed away from confrontation, and Gilbey lapsed into a moody silence. For a while there were only the sounds of chopper blades and the radio blatting out cocktail jazz. Two mechanics wandered in for an early morning beer, and not long after that three fatherly-looking sergeants with potbellies and thinning hair and quartermaster insignia on their shoulders sat at a nearby table and started up a game of rummy. The corporal brought them a pot of coffee and a bottle of whiskey, which they mixed and drank as they played. Their game had an air of custom, of something done at this time every day, and watching them, taking note of their fat, pampered ease, their old-buddy familiarity, Mingolla felt proud of his palsied hand. It was an honorable affliction, a sign that he had participated in the heart of the war as these men had not. Yet he bore them no resentment. None whatsoever. Rather it gave him a sense of security to know that three such fatherly men were here to provide him with food and liquor and new boots. He basked in the dull, happy clutter of their talk, in the haze of cigar smoke that seemed the exhaust of their contentment. He believed that he could go to them, tell them his problems and receive folksy advice. They were here to assure him of the rightness of his purpose, to remind him of simple American values, to lend an illusion of fraternal involvement to the war, to make clear that it was merely an exercise in good fellowship and tough-mindedness, an initiation rite that these three men had long ago passed through, and after the war they would all get rings and medals and pal around together and talk about bloodshed and terror with head-shaking wonderment and nostalgia, as if bloodshed and terror were old, lost friends whose natures they had not fully appreciated at the time . . . Mingolla realized then that a smile had stretched his facial muscles taut, and that his train of thought had been leading him into

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spooky mental territory. The tremors in his hand were worse than ever. He checked his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. *Ten o'clock!* In a panic, he scraped back his chair and stood.

"Let's look for him," he said to Gilbey.

Gilbey started to say something but kept it to himself. He tapped his spoon hard against the edge of the table. Then he, too, scraped back his chair and stood.

Baylor was not be found at the Club Demonio or any of the bars on the west bank. Gilbey and Mingolla described him to everyone they met, but no one remembered him. The longer the search went on, the more insecure Mingolla became. Baylor was necessary, an essential underpinning of the platform of habits and routines that supported him, that let him live beyond the range of war's weapons and the laws of chance, and should that underpinning be destroyed . . . In his mind's eye he saw the platform tipping, him and Gilbey toppling over the edge, cartwheeling down into an abyss filled with black flames. Once Gilbey said, "Panama! The son of a bitch run off to Panama." But Mingolla didn't think this was the case. He was certain that Baylor was close at hand. His certainty had such a valence of clarity that he became even more insecure, knowing that this sort of clarity often heralded a bad conclusion.

The sun climbed higher, its heat an enormous weight pressing down, its light leaching color from the stucco walls, and Mingolla's sweat began to smell rancid. Only a few soldiers were on the streets, mixed in with the usual run of kids and beggars, and the bars were empty except for a smattering of drunks still on a binge from the night before. Gilbey stumped along, grabbing people by the shirt and asking his questions. Mingolla, however, terribly conscious of his trembling hand, nervous to the point of stammering, was forced to work out a stock approach whereby he could get through these brief interviews. He would amble up, keeping his right side forward, and say, "I'm looking for a friend of mine. Maybe you seen him? Tall guy. Olive skin, black hair, thin. Name's Baylor." He came to be able to let this slide off his tongue in a casual unreeling.

Finally Gilbey had had enough. "I'm gonna hang out with Big Tits," he said. "Meet'cha at the PX tomorrow." He started to walk off, but turned and added, "You wanna get in touch 'fore tomorrow, I'll be at the Club Demonio." He had an odd expression on his face. It was as if he were trying to smile reassuringly, but—due to his lack of practice with smiles—it looked forced and foolish and not in the least reassuring.

Around eleven 'clock Mingolla wound up leaning against a pink stucco wall, watching out for Baylor in the thickening crowds. Beside him, the sun-browned fronds of a banana tree were feathering in the wind, making a crispy sound whenever a gust blew them back into the wall. The roof

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of the bar across the street was being repaired: patches of new tin alternating with narrow strips of rust that looked like enormous strips of bacon laid there to fry. Now and then he would let his gaze drift up to the unfinished bridge, a great sweep of magical whiteness curving into the blue, rising above the town and the jungle and the war. Not even the heat haze rippling from the tin roof could warp its smoothness. It seemed to be orchestrating the stench, the mutter of the crowds, and the jukebox music into a tranquil unity, absorbing those energies and returning them purified, enriched. He thought that if he stared at it long enough, it would speak to him, pronounce a white word that would grant his wishes.

Two flat cracks—pistol shots—sent him stumbling away from the wall, his heart racing. Inside his head the shots had spoken the two syllables of Baylor's name. All the kids and beggars had vanished. All the soldiers had stopped and turned to face the direction from which the shots had come: zombies who had heard their master's voice.

Another shot.

Some soldiers milled out of a side street, talking excitedly. ". . . fuckin' nuts!" one was saying, and his buddy said, "It was Sammy, man! You see his eyes?"

Mingolla pushed his way through them and sprinted down the side street. At the end of the block a cordon of MPs had sealed off access to the right-hand turn, and when Mingolla ran up one of them told him to stay back.

"What is it?" Mingolla asked. "Some guy playing Sammy?"

"Fuck off," the MP said mildly.

"Listen," said Mingolla. "It might be this friend of mine. Tall, skinny guy. Black hair. Maybe I can talk to him."

The MP exchanged glances with his buddies, who shrugged and acted otherwise unconcerned. "Okay," he said. He pulled Mingolla to him and pointed out a bar with turquoise walls on the next corner down. "Go on in there and talk to the captain."

Two more shots, then a third.

"Better hurry," said the MP. "Ol' Captain Haynesworth there, he don't have much faith in negotiations."

It was cool and dark inside the bar; two shadowy figures were flattened against the wall beside a window that opened onto the cross-street. Mingolla could make out the glint of automatic pistols in their hands. Then, through the window, he saw Baylor pop up from behind a retaining wall: a three-foot-high structure of mud bricks running between a herbal drugstore and another bar. Baylor was shirtless, his chest painted with reddish-brown smears of dried blood, and he was standing in a nonchalant

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pose, with his thumbs hooked in his trouser pockets. One of the men by the window fired at him. The report was deafening, causing Mingolla to flinch and close his eyes. When he looked out the window again, Baylor was nowhere in sight.

"Fucker's just tryin' to draw fire," said the man who had shot at Baylor. "Sammy's fast today."

"Yeah, but he's slowin' some," said a lazy voice from the darkness at the rear of the bar. "I do believe he's outta dope."

"Hey," said Mingolla. "Don't kill him! I know the guy. I can talk to him."

"Talk?" said the lazy voice. "You kin talk 'til yo' ass turns green, boy, and Sammy ain't gon' listen."

Mingolla peered into the shadows. A big, sloppy-looking man was leaning on the counter; brass insignia gleamed on his beret. "You the captain?" he asked. "They told me outside to talk to the captain."

"Yes, indeed," said the man. "And I'd be purely delighted to talk with you, boy. What you wanna talk 'bout?"

The other men laughed.

"Why are you trying to kill him?" asked Mingolla, hearing the pitch of desperation in his voice. "You don't have to kill him. You could use a trank gun."

"Got one comin'," said the captain. "Thing is, though, yo' buddy got hisself a coupla hostages back of that wall, and we get a chance at him 'fore the trank gun 'rives, we bound to take it."

"But . . ." Mingolla began.

"Lemme finish, boy." The captain hitched up his gunbelt, strolled over and draped an arm around Mingolla's shoulder, enveloping him in an aura of body odor and whiskey breath. "See," he went on, "we had everything under control. Sammy there . . ."

"Baylor!" said Mingolla angrily. "His name's Baylor."

The captain lifted his arm from Mingolla's shoulder and looked at him with amusement. Even in the gloom Mingolla could see the network of broken capillaries on his cheeks, the bloated alcoholic features. "Right," said the captain. "Like I's sayin', yo' good buddy Mister Baylor there wasn't doin' no harm. Just sorta ravin' and runnin' round. But then 'long comes a coupla our Marine brothers. Seems like they'd been givin' our beaner friends a demonstration of the latest combat gear, and they was headin' back from said demonstration when they seen our little problem and took it 'pon themselves to play hero. Wellsir, puttin' it in a nutshell, Mister Baylor flat kicked their ass. Stomped all over their *esprit de corps*. Then he drags 'em back of that wall and starts messin' with one of their guns. And . . ."

Two more shots.

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"Shit!" said one of the men by the window.

"And there he sits," said the captain. "Fuckin' with us. Now either the gun's outta ammo or else he ain't figgered out how it works. If it's the latter case, and he does figger it out . . ." The captain shook his head dolefully, as if picturing dire consequences. "See my predicament?"

"I could try talking to him," said Mingolla. "What harm would it do?"

"You get yourself killed, it's your life, boy. But it's my ass that's gonna get hauled up on charges." The captain steered Mingolla to the door and gave him a gentle shove toward the cordon of MPs. " 'Preciate you volunteerin', boy."

Later Mingolla was to reflect that what he had done had made no sense, because—whether or not Baylor had survived—he would never have been returned to the Ant Farm. But at the time, desperate to preserve the ritual, none of this occurred to him. He walked around the corner and toward the retaining wall. His mouth was dry, his heart pounded. But the shaking in his hand had stopped, and he had the presence of mind to walk in such a way that he blocked the MPs' line of fire. About twenty feet from the wall he called out, "Hey, Baylor! It's Mingolla, man!" And as if propelled by a spring, Baylor jumped up, staring at him. It was an awful stare. His eyes were like bulls-eyes, white showing all around the irises; trickles of blood ran from his nostrils, and nerves were twitching in his cheeks with the regularity of watchworks. The dried blood on his chest came from three long gouges; they were partially scabbed over but were oozing a clear fluid. For a moment he remained motionless. Then he reached down behind the wall, picked up a double-barreled rifle from whose stock trailed a length of flexible tubing, and brought it to bear on Mingolla.

He squeezed the trigger.

No flame, no explosion. Not even a click. But Mingolla felt that he'd been dipped in ice water. "Christ!" he said. "Baylor! It's me!" Baylor squeezed the trigger again, with the same result. An expression of intense frustration washed over his face, then lapsed into that dead man's stare. He looked directly up into the sun, and after a few seconds he smiled: he might have been receiving terrific news from on high.

Mingolla's senses had become wonderfully acute. Somewhere far away a radio was playing a country and western tune, and with its plaintiveness, its intermittent bursts of static, it seemed to him the whining of a nervous system on the blink. He could hear the MPs talking in the bar, could smell the sour acids of Baylor's madness, and he thought he could feel the pulse of Baylor's rage, an inconstant flow of heat eddying around him, intensifying his fear, rooting him to the spot. Baylor laid the gun down, laid it down with the tenderness he might have shown toward a sick child, and stepped over the retaining wall. The animal

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fluidity of the movement made Mingolla's skin crawl. He managed to shuffle backward a pace and held up his hands to ward Baylor off. "C'mon, man," he said weakly. Baylor let out a fuming noise—part hiss, part whimper—and a runner of saliva slid between his lips. The sun was a golden bath drenching the street, kindling glints and shimmers from every bright surface, as if it were bringing reality to a boil.

Somebody yelled, "Get down, boy!"

Then Baylor flew at him, and they fell together, rolling on the hard-packed dirt. Fingers dug in behind his Adam's apple. He twisted away, saw Baylor grinning down, all staring eyes and yellowed teeth. Strings of drool flapping from his chin. A Halloween face. Knees pinned Mingolla's shoulders, hands gripped his hair and bashed his head against the ground. Again, and again. A keening sound switched on inside his ears. He wrenched an arm free and tried to gouge Baylor's eyes; but Baylor bit his thumb, gnawing at the joint. Mingolla's vision dimmed, and he couldn't hear anything anymore. The back of his head felt mushy. It seemed to be rebounding very slowly from the dirt, higher and slower after each impact. Framed by blue sky, Baylor's face looked to be receding, spiraling off. And then, just as Mingolla began to fade, Baylor disappeared.

Dust was in Mingolla's mouth, his nostrils. He heard shouts, grunts. Still dazed, he propped himself onto an elbow. A little ways off, khaki arms and legs and butts were thrashing around in a cloud of dust. Like a comic strip fight. You expected asterisks and exclamation points overhead to signify profanity. Somebody grabbed his arm, hauled him upright. The MP captain, his beefy face flushed. He frowned reprovingly as he brushed dirt from Mingolla's clothes. "Real gutsy, boy," he said. "And real, real stupid. He hadn't been at the end of his run, you'd be drawin' flies 'bout now." He turned to a sergeant standing nearby. "How stupid you reckon that was, Phil?"

The sergeant said that it beat him.

"Well," the captain said, "I figger if the boy here was in combat, that'd be 'bout Bronze-Star stupid."

That, allowed the sergeant, was pretty goddamn stupid.

" 'Course here in 'Frisco"—the captain gave Mingolla a final dusting—"it don't get you diddley-shit."

The MPs were piling off Baylor, who lay on his side, bleeding from his nose and mouth. Blood thick as gravy filmed over his cheeks.

"Panama," said Mingolla dully. Maybe it *was* an option. He saw how it would be . . . a night beach, palm shadows a lacework on the white sand.

"What say?" asked the captain.

"He wanted to go to Panama," said Mingolla.

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The captain gave an amused snort. "Don't we all."

One of the MPs rolled Baylor onto his stomach and handcuffed him; another manacled his feet. Then they rolled him back over. Yellow dirt had mired with the blood on his cheeks and forehead, fitting him with a blotchy mask. His eyes snapped open in the middle of that mask, widening when he felt the restraints. He started to hump up and down, trying to bounce his way to freedom. He kept on humping for almost a minute; then he went rigid and—his gone eyes fixed on the molten disc of the sun—he let out a roar. That was the only word for it. It wasn't a scream or a shout, but a devil's exultant roar, so loud and full of fury, it seemed to be generating all the blazing light and heat-dance. Listening to it had a seductive effect, and Mingolla began to get behind it, to feel it in his body like a good rock 'n' roll tune, to sympathize with its life-hating exuberance.

"Whoo-ee!" said the captain, marveling. "They gon' have to build a whole new zoo for that boy."

After giving his statement, letting a Corpsman check his head, Mingolla caught the ferry to meet Debora on the east bank. He sat in the stern, gazing out at the unfinished bridge, this time unable to derive from it any sense of hope or magic. Panama kept cropping up in his thoughts. Now that Baylor was gone, was it really an option? He knew he should try to figure things out, plan what to do, but he couldn't stop seeing Baylor's bloody, demented face. He'd seen worse, Christ yes, a whole lot worse. Guys reduced to spare parts, so little of them left that they didn't need a shiny silver coffin, just a black metal can the size of a cookie jar. Guys scorched and one-eyed and bloody, clawing blindly at the air like creatures out of a monster movie. But the idea of Baylor trapped forever in some raw, red place inside his brain, in the heart of that raw, red noise he'd made, maybe that idea was worse than anything Mingolla had seen. He didn't want to die; he rejected the prospect with the impassioned stubbornness a child displays when confronted with a hard truth. Yet he would rather die than endure madness. Compared to what Baylor had in store, death and Panama seemed to offer the same peaceful sweetness.

Someone sat down beside Mingolla: a kid who couldn't have been older than eighteen. A new kid with a new haircut, new boots, new fatigues. Even his face looked new, freshly broken from the mold. Shiny, pudgy cheeks; clear skin; bright, unused blue eyes. He was eager to talk. He asked Mingolla about his home, his family, and said, Oh, wow, it must be great living in New York, wow. But he appeared to have some other reason for initiating the conversation, something he was leading up to, and finally he spat it out.

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"You know the Sammy that went animal back there?" he said. "I seen him pitted last night. Little place in the jungle west of the base. Guy name Chaco owns it. Man, it was incredible!"

Mingolla had only heard of the pits third- and fourth-hand, but what he had heard was bad, and it was hard to believe that this kid with his air of homeboy innocence could be an afficionado of something so vile. And, despite what he had just witnessed, it was even harder to believe that Baylor could have been a participant.

The kid didn't need prompting. "It was pretty early on," he said. "There'd been a coupla bouts, nothin' special, and then this guy walks in lookin' real twitchy. I knew he was Sammy by the way he's starin' at the pit, y'know, like it's somethin' he's been wishin' for. And this guy with me, friend of mine, he gives me a poke and says, 'Holy shit! That's the Black Knight, man! I seen him fight over in Reunion awhile back. Put your money on him,' he says. 'The guy's an ace!' "

Their last r&r had been in Reunion. Mingolla tried to frame a question but couldn't think of one whose answer would have any meaning.

"Well," said the kid, "I ain't been down long, but I'd even heard 'bout the Knight. So I went over and kinda hung out near him, thinkin' maybe I can get a line on how he's feelin', y'know, 'cause you don't wanna just bet the guy's rep. Pretty soon Chaco comes over and asks the Knight if he wants some action. The Knight says, 'Yeah, but I wanna fight an animal. Somethin' fierce, man. I wanna fight somethin' fierce.' Chaco says he's got some monkeys and shit, and the Knight says he hears Chaco's got a jaguar. Chaco he hems and haws, says Maybe so, maybe not, but it don't matter 'cause a jaguar's too strong for Sammy. And then the Knight tells Chaco who he is. Lemme tell ya, Chaco's whole attitude changed. He could see how the bettin' was gonna go for somethin' like the Black Knight versus a jaguar. And he says, 'Yes sir, Mister Black Knight sir! Anything you want!' And he makes the announcement. Man, the place goes nuts. People wavin' money, screamin' odds, drinkin' fast so's they can get ripped in time for the main event, and the Knight's just standin' there, smilin', like he's feedin' off the confusion. Then Chaco lets the jaguar in through the tunnel and into the pit. It ain't a full-growed jaguar, half-growed maybe, but that's all you figure even the Knight can handle."

The kid paused for breath; his eyes seemed to have grown brighter. "Anyway, the jaguar's sneakin' 'round and 'round, keepin' close to the pit wall, snarlin' and spittin', and the Knight's watchin' him from up above, checkin' his moves, y'know. And everybody starts chantin', 'Sam-mee, Sam-mee, Sam-mee,' and after the chant builds up loud the Knight pulls three ampules outta his pocket. I mean, shit, man! Three! I ain't never been 'round Sammy when he's done more'n two. Three gets you

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clear into the fuckin' sky! So when the Knight holds up these three ampules, the crowd's tuned to burn, howlin' like they's playin' Sammy themselves. But the Knight, man, he keeps his cool. He is *so* cool! He just holds up the ampules and lets 'em take the shine, soakin' up the noise and energy, gettin' strong off the crowd's juice. Chaco waves everybody quiet and gives the speech, y'know, 'bout how in the heart of every man there's a warrior-soul waitin' to be loosed and shit. I tell ya, man, I always thought that speech was crap before, but the Knight's makin' me buy it a hunnerd percent. He is so goddamn cool! He takes off his shirt and shoes, and he ties this piece of black silk 'round his arm. Then he pops the ampules, one after another, real quick, and breathes it all in. I can see it hittin', catchin' fire in his eyes. Pumpin' him up. And soon as he's popped the last one, he jumps into the pit. He don't use the tunnel, man! He jumps! Twenty-five feet down to the sand, and lands in a crouch."

Three other soldiers were leaning in, listening, and the kid was now addressing all of them, playing to his audience. He was so excited that he could barely keep his speech coherent, and Mingolla realized with disgust that he, too, was excited by the image of Baylor crouched on the sand. Baylor, who had cried after the assault. Baylor, who had been so afraid of snipers that he had once pissed in his pants rather than walk from his gun to the latrine.

Baylor, the Black Knight.

"The jaguar's screechin' and snarlin' and slashin' at the air," the kid went on. "Tryin' to put fear into the Knight. 'Cause the jaguar knows in his mind the Knight's big trouble. This ain't some jerk like Chaco, this is Sammy. The Knight moves to the center of the pit, still in a crouch." Here the kid pitched his voice low and dramatic. "Nothin' happens for a coupla minutes, 'cept it's tense. Nobody's hardly breathin'. The jaguar springs a coupla times, but the Knight dances off to the side and makes him miss, and there ain't no damage either way. Whenever the jaguar springs, the crowd sighs and squeals, not just 'cause they's scared of seein' the Knight tore up, but also 'cause they can see how fast he is. Silky fast, man! Unreal. He looks 'bout as fast as the jaguar. He keeps on dancin' away, and no matter how the jaguar twists and turns, no matter if he comes at him along the sand, he can't get his claws into the Knight. And then, man . . . oh, it was so smooth! Then the jaguar springs again, and this time 'stead of dancin' away, the Knight drops onto his back, does this half roll onto his shoulders, and when the jaguar passes over him, he kicks up with both feet. Kicks up hard! And smashes his heels into the jaguar's side. The jaguar slams into the pit wall and comes down screamin', snappin' at his ribs. They was busted, man. Pokin' out the skin like tentposts."

The kid wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and flicked his eyes

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toward Mingolla and the other soldiers to see if they were into the story. "We was shoutin', man," he said. "Poundin' the top of the pit wall. It was so loud, the guy I'm with is yellin' in my ear and I can't hear nothin'. Now maybe it's the noise, maybe it's his ribs, whatever . . . the jaguar goes berserk. Makin' these scuttlin' lunges at the Knight, tryin' to get close 'fore he springs so the Knight can't pull that same trick. He's snarlin' like a goddamn chainsaw! The Knight keeps leapin' and spinnin' away. But then he slips, man, grabs the air for balance, and the jaguar's on him, clawin' at his chest. For a second they're like waltzin' together. Then the Knight pries loose the paw that's hooked him, pushes the jaguar's head back and smashes his fist into the jaguar's eye. The jaguar flops onto the sand, and the Knight scoots to the other side of the pit. He's checkin' the scratches on his chest, which is bleedin' wicked. Meantime, the jaguar gets to his feet, and he's fucked up worse than ever. His one eye's fulla blood, and his hindquarters is all loosey-goosey. Like if this was boxin', they'd call in the doctor. The jaguar figures he's had enough of this crap, and he starts tryin' to jump outta the pit. This one time he jumps right up to where I'm leanin' over the edge. Comes so close I can smell his breath, I can see myself reflected in his good eye. He's clawin' for a grip, wantin' to haul hisself up into the crowd. People are freakin', thinkin' he might be gonna make it. But 'fore he gets the chance, the Knight catches him by the tail and slings him against the wall. Just like you'd beat a goddamn rug, that's how he's dealin' with the jaguar. And the jaguar's a real mess, now. He's quiverin'. Blood's pourin' outta his mouth, his fangs is all red. The Knight starts makin' these little feints, wavin' his arms, growlin'. He's toyin' with the jaguar. People don't believe what they're seein', man. Sammy's kickin' a jaguar's ass so bad he's got room to toy with it. If the place was nuts before, now it's a fuckin' zoo. Fights in the crowd, guys singin' the Marine Hymn. Some beaner squint's takin' off her clothes. The jaguar tries to scuttle up close to the Knight again, but he's too fucked up. He can't keep it together. And the Knight he's still growlin' and feintin'. A guy behind me is booin', claimin' the Knight's defamin' the purity of the sport by playin' with the jaguar. But hell, man, I can see he's just timin' the jaguar, waitin' for the right moment, the right move."

Staring off downriver, the kid wore a wistful expression: he might have been thinking about his girlfriend. "We all knew it was comin'," he said. "Everybody got real quiet. So quiet you could hear the Knight's feet scrapin' on the sand. You could feel it in the air, and you knew the jaguar was savin' up for one big effort. Then the Knight slips again, 'cept he's fakin'. I could see that, but the jaguar couldn't. When the Knight reels sideways, the jaguar springs. I thought the Knight was gonna drop down like he did the first time, but he springs, too. Feetfirst. And he catches

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the jaguar under the jaw. You could hear bone splinterin', and the jaguar falls in a heap. He struggles to get up, but no way! He's whinin', and he craps all over the sand. The Knight walks up behind him, takes his head in both hands and gives it a twist. Crack!"

As if identifying with the jaguar's fate, the kid closed his eyes and sighed. "Everybody'd been quiet 'til they heard that crack, then all hell broke loose. People chantin', 'Sam-mee, Sam-mee,' and people shovin', tryin' to get close to the pit wall so they can watch the Knight take the heart. He reaches into the jaguar's mouth and snaps off one of the fangs and tosses it to somebody. Then Chaco comes in through the tunnel and hands him the knife. Right when he's 'bout to cut, somebody knocks me over and by the time I'm back on my feet, he's already took the heart and tasted it. He's just standin' there with the jaguar's blood on his mouth and his own blood runnin' down his chest. He looks kinda confused, y'know. Like now the fight's over and he don't know what to do. But then he starts roarin'. He sounds the same as the jaguar did 'fore it got hurt. Crazy fierce. Ready to get it on with the whole goddamn world. Man, I lost it! I was right with that roar. Maybe I was roarin' with him, maybe everybody was. That's what it felt like, man. Like bein' in the middle of this roar that's comin' outta every throat in the universe." The kid engaged Mingolla with a sober look. "Lotsa people go 'round sayin' the pits are evil, and maybe they are. I don't know. How you s'posed to tell 'bout what's evil and what's not down here? They say you can go to the pits a thousand times and not see nothin' like the jaguar and the Black Knight. I don't know 'bout that, either. But I'm goin' back just in case I get lucky. 'Cause what I saw last night, if it was evil, man, it was so fuckin' evil it was beautiful, too."

3

Debora was waiting at the pier, carrying a picnic basket and wearing a blue dress with a high neckline and a full skirt: a schoolgirl dress. Mingolla homed in on her. The way she had her hair, falling about her shoulders in thick, dark curls, made him think of smoke turned solid, and her face seemed the map of a beautiful country with black lakes and dusky plains, a country in which he could hide. They walked along the river past the town and came to a spot where ceiba trees with slick green leaves and whitish bark and roots like alligator tails grew close to the shore, and there they ate and talked and listened to the water gulping against the clay bank, to the birds, to the faint noises from the airbase that at this distance sounded part of nature. Sunlight dazzled the water, and whenever wind riffled the surface, it looked as if it were spreading

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the dazzles into a crawling crust of diamonds. Mingolla imagined that they had taken a secret path, rounded a corner on the world and reached some eternally peaceful land. The illusion of peace was so profound that he began to see hope in it. Perhaps, he thought, something was being offered here. Some new magic. Maybe there would be a sign. Signs were everywhere if you knew how to read them. He glanced around. Thick white trunks rising into greenery, dark leafy avenues leading off between them . . . nothing there, but what about those weeds growing at the edge of the bank? They cast precise fleur-de-lis shadows on the clay, shadows that didn't have much in common with the ragged configurations of the weeds themselves. Possibly a sign, though not a clear one. He lifted his gaze to the reeds growing in the shallows. Yellow reeds with jointed stalks bent akimbo, some with clumps of insect eggs like seed pearls hanging from loose fibers, and others dappled by patches of algae. That's how they looked one moment. Then Mingolla's vision rippled, as if the whole of reality had shivered, and the reeds were transformed into rudimentary shapes: yellow sticks poking up from flat blue. On the far side of the river, the jungle was a simple smear of Crayola green; a speedboat passing with a red slash unzippering the blue. It seemed that the rippling had jostled every element of the landscape a fraction out of kilter, revealing each one to be as characterless as a building block. Mingolla gave his head a shake. Nothing changed. He rubbed his brow. No effect. Terrified, he squeezed his eyes shut. He felt like the only meaningful piece in a nonsensical puzzle, vulnerable by virtue of his uniqueness. His breath came rapidly, his left hand fluttered.

"David? Don't you want to hear it?" Debora sounded peeved.

"Hear what?" He kept his eyes closed.

"About my dream. Weren't you listening?"

He peeked at her. Everything was back to normal. She was sitting with her knees tucked under her, all her features in sharp focus. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was thinking."

"You looked frightened."

"Frightened?" He put on a bewildered face. "Naw, just had a thought is all."

"It couldn't have been pleasant."

He shrugged off the comment and sat up smartly to prove his attentiveness. "So tell me 'bout the dream."

"All right," she said doubtfully. The breeze drifted fine strands of hair across her face, and she brushed them back. "You were in a room the color of blood, with red chairs and a red table. Even the paintings on the wall were done in shades of red, and . . ." She broke off, peering at him. "Do you want to hear this? You have that look again."

"Sure," he said. But he was afraid. How could she have known about

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the red room? She must have had a vision of it, and . . . Then he realized that she might not have been talking about the room itself. He'd told her about the assault, hadn't he? And if she had guerrilla contacts, she would know that the emergency lights were switched on during an assault. That had to be it! She was trying to frighten him into deserting again, psyching him the way preachers played upon the fears of sinners with images of fiery rivers and torture. It infuriated him. Who the hell was she to tell him what was right or wise? Whatever he did, it was going to be *his* decision.

"There were three doors in the room," she went on. "You wanted to leave the room, but you couldn't tell which of the doors was safe to use. You tried the first door, and it turned out to be a façade. The knob of the second door turned easily, but the door itself was stuck. Rather than forcing it, you went to the third door. The knob of this door was made of glass and cut your hand. After that you just walked back and forth, unsure what to do." She waited for a reaction, and when he gave none, she said, "Do you understand?"

He kept silent, biting back anger.

"I'll interpret it for you," she said.

"Don't bother."

"The red room is war, and the false door is the way of your childish . . ."

"Stop!" He grabbed her wrist, squeezing it hard.

She glared at him until he released her. "Your childish magic," she finished.

"What is it with you?" he asked. "You have some kinda quota to fill? Five deserters a month, and you get a medal?"

She tucked her skirt down to cover her knees, fiddled with a loose thread. From the way she was acting, you might have thought he had asked an intimate question and she was framing an answer that wouldn't be indelicate. Finally she said, "Is that who you believe I am to you?"

"Isn't that right? Why else would you be handing me this bullshit?"

"What's the matter with you, David?" She leaned forward, cupping his face in her hands. "Why . . ."

He pushed her hands away. "What's the matter with me? This"—his gesture included the sky, the river, the trees—"that's what's the matter. You remind me of my parents. They ask the same sorta ignorant questions." Suddenly he wanted to injure her with answers, to find an answer like acid to throw in her face and watch it eat away her tranquility. "Know what I do for my parents?" he said. "When they ask dumb-ass questions like 'What's the matter?', I tell 'em a story. A war story. You wanna hear a war story? Something happened a few days back that'll do for an answer just fine."

"You don't have to tell me anything," she said, discouraged.

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"No problem," he said. "Be my pleasure."

The Ant Farm was a large sugar-loaf hill overlooking dense jungle on the eastern border of Fire Zone Emerald; jutting out from its summit were rocket and gun emplacements that at a distance resembled a crown of thorns jammed down over a green scalp. For several hundred yards around, the land had been cleared of all vegetation. The big guns had been lowered to maximum declension and in a mad moment had obliterated huge swaths of jungle, snapping off regiments of massive tree trunks a couple of feet above the ground, leaving a moat of blackened stumps and scorched red dirt seamed with fissures. Tangles of razor wire had replaced the trees and bushes, forming surreal blue-steel hedges, and buried beneath the wire were a variety of mines and detection devices. These did little good, however, because the Cubans possessed technology that would neutralize most of them. On clear nights there was little likelihood of trouble; but on misty nights trouble could be expected. Under cover of the mist Cuban and guerrilla troops would come through the wire and attempt to infiltrate the tunnels that honeycombed the interior of the hill. Occasionally one of the mines would be triggered, and you would see a ghostly fireball bloom in the swirling whiteness, tiny black figures being flung outward from its center. Lately some of these casualties had been found to be wearing red berets and scorpion-shaped brass pins, and from this it was known that the Cubans had sent in the Alacran Division, which had been instrumental in routing the American Forces in Miskitia.

There were nine levels of tunnels inside the hill, most lined with little round rooms that served as living quarters (the only exception being the bottom level, which was given over to the computer center and offices); all the rooms and tunnels were coated with a bubbled white plastic that looked like hardened seafoam and was proof against anti-personnel explosives. In Mingolla's room, where he and Baylor and Gilbey bunked, a scarlet paper lantern had been hung on the overhead light fixture, making it seem that they were inhabiting a blood cell: Baylor had insisted on the lantern, saying that the overhead was too bright and hurt his eyes. Three cots were arranged against the walls, as far apart as space allowed. The floor around Baylor's cot was littered with cigarette butts and used Kleenex; under his pillow he kept a tin box containing a stash of pills and marijuana. Whenever he lit a joint he would always offer Mingolla a hit, and Mingolla always refused, feeling that the experience of the firebase would not be enhanced by drugs. Taped to the wall above Gilbey's cot was a collage of beaver shots, and each day after duty, whether or not Mingolla and Baylor were in the room, he would lie beneath them and masturbate. His lack of shame caused Mingolla to be

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embarrassed by his own secretiveness in the act, and he was also embarrassed by the pimply-youth quality of the objects taped above his cot: a Yankee pennant; a photograph of his old girlfriend, and another of his senior-year high school basketball team; several sketches he had made of the surrounding jungle. Gilbey teased him constantly about this display, calling him "the boy-next-door," which struck Mingolla as odd, because back home he had been considered something of an eccentric.

It was toward this room that Mingolla was heading when the assault began. Large cargo elevators capable of carrying up to sixty men ran up and down just inside the east and west slopes of the hill; but to provide quick access between adjoining levels, and also as a safeguard in case of power failures, an auxiliary tunnel corkscrewed down through the center of the hill like a huge coil of white intestine. It was slightly more than twice as wide as the electric carts that traveled it, carrying officers and VIPs on tours. Mingolla was in the habit of using the tunnel for his exercise. Each night he would put on sweat clothes and jog up and down the entire nine levels, doing this out of a conviction that exhaustion prevented bad dreams. That night, as he passed Level Four on his final leg up, he heard a rumbling: an explosion, and not far off. Alarms sounded, the big guns atop the hill began to thunder. From directly above came shouts and the stutter of automatic fire. The tunnel lights flickered, went dark, and the emergency lights winked on.

Mingolla flattened against the wall. The dim red lighting caused the bubbled surfaces of the tunnel to appear as smooth as a chamber in a gigantic nautilus, and this resemblance intensified his sense of helplessness, making him feel like a child trapped in an evil undersea palace. He couldn't think clearly, picturing the chaos around him. Muzzle flashes, armies of ant-men seething through the tunnels, screams spraying blood, and the big guns bucking, every shellburst kindling miles of sky. He would have preferred to keep going up, to get out into the open where he might have a chance to hide in the jungle. But down was his only hope. Pushing away from the wall, he ran full-tilt, arms waving, skidding around corners, almost falling, past Level Four, Level Five. Then, halfway between Levels Five and Six, he nearly tripped over a dead man: an American lying curled up around a belly wound, a slick of blood spreading beneath him and a machete by his hand. As Mingolla stooped for the machete, he thought nothing about the man, only about how weird it was for an American to be defending himself against Cubans with such a weapon. There was no use, he decided, in going any farther. Whoever had killed the man would be somewhere below, and the safest course would be to hide out in one of the rooms on Level Five. Holding the machete before him, he moved cautiously back up the tunnel.

Levels Five through Seven were officer country, and though the tun-

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nels were the same as the ones above—gently curving tubes eight feet high and ten feet wide—the rooms were larger and contained only two cots. The rooms Mingolla peered into were empty, and this, despite the sounds of battle, gave him a secure feeling. But as he passed beyond the tunnel curve, he heard shouts in Spanish from his rear. He peeked back around the curve. A skinny black soldier wearing a red beret and gray fatigues was inching toward the first doorway; then, rifle at the ready, he ducked inside. Two other Cubans—slim bearded men, their skins sallow-looking in the bloody light—were standing by the arched entranceway to the auxiliary tunnel; when they saw the black soldier emerge from the room, they walked off in the opposite direction, probably to check the rooms at the far end of the level.

Mingolla began to operate in a kind of luminous panic. He realized that he would have to kill the black soldier. Kill him without any fuss, take his rifle and hope that he could catch the other two off-guard when they came back for him. He slipped into the nearest room and stationed himself against the wall to the right of the door. The Cuban, he had noticed, had turned left on entering the room; he would have been vulnerable to someone positioned like Mingolla. Vulnerable for a split-second. Less than a count of one. The pulse in Mingolla's temple throbbed, and he gripped the machete tightly in his left hand. He rehearsed mentally what he would have to do. Stab; clamp a hand over the Cuban's mouth; bring his knee up to jar loose the rifle. And he would have to perform these actions simultaneously, execute them perfectly.

Perfect execution.

He almost laughed out loud, remembering his paunchy old basketball coach saying, "Perfect execution, boys. That's what beats a zone. Forget the fancy crap. Just set your screens, run your patterns and get your shots down."

Hoops ain't nothin' but life in short pants, huh, Coach?

Mingolla drew a deep breath and let it sigh out through his nostrils. He couldn't believe he was going to die. He had spent the past nine months worrying about death, but when it got right down to it, when the circumstances arose that made death likely, it was hard to take that likelihood seriously. It didn't seem reasonable that a skinny black guy should be his nemesis. His death should involve massive detonations of light, special Mingolla-killing rays, astronomical portents. Not some scrawny little shit with a rifle. He drew another breath and for the first time registered the contents of the room. Two cots; clothes strewn everywhere; taped-up polaroids and pornography. Officer country or not, it was your basic Ant Farm decor; under the red light it looked squalid, long-abandoned. He was amazed by how calm he felt. Oh, he was afraid all right! But fear was tucked into the dark folds of his personality like

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a murderer's knife hidden inside an old coat on a closet shelf. Glowing in secret, waiting its chance to shine. Sooner or later it would skewer him, but for now it was an ally, acting to sharpen his senses. He could see every bubbled pucker on the white walls, could hear the scrape of the Cuban's boots as he darted into the room next door, could feel how the Cuban swung the rifle left-to-right, paused, turned . . .

He *could* feel the Cuban! Feel his heat, his heated shape, the exact position of his body. It was as if a thermal imager had been switched on inside his head, one that worked through walls.

The Cuban eased toward Mingolla's door, his progress tangible, like a burning match moving behind a sheet of paper. Mingolla's calm was shattered. The man's heat, his fleshy temperature, was what disturbed him. He had imagined himself killing with a cinematic swiftness and lack of mess; now he thought of hogs being butchered and piledrivers smashing the skulls of cows. And could he trust this freakish form of perception? What if he couldn't? What if he stabbed too late? Too soon? Then the hot, alive thing was almost at the door, and having no choice, Mingolla timed his attack to its movements, stabbing just as the Cuban entered.

He executed perfectly.

The blade slid home beneath the Cuban's ribs, and Mingolla clamped a hand over his mouth, muffling his outcry. His knee nailed the rifle stock, sending it clattering to the floor. The Cuban thrashed wildly. He stank of rotten jungle air and cigarettes. His eyes rolled back, trying to see Mingolla. Crazy animal eyes, with liverish whites and expanded pupils. Sweat beads glittered redly on his brow. Mingolla twisted the machete, and the Cuban's eyelids fluttered down. But a second later they snapped open, and he lunged. They went staggering deeper into the room and teetered beside one of the cots. Mingolla wrangled the Cuban sideways and rammed him against the wall, pinning him there. Writhing, the Cuban nearly broke free. He seemed to be getting stronger, his squeals leaking out from Mingolla's hand. He reached behind him, clawing at Mingolla's face; he grabbed a clump of hair, yanked it. Desperate, Mingolla sawed with the machete. That tuned the Cuban's squeals higher, louder. He squirmed and clawed at the wall. Mingolla's clamped hand was slick with the Cuban's saliva, his nostrils full of the man's rank scent. He felt queasy, weak, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could hang on. The son of a bitch was never going to die, he was deriving strength from the steel in his guts, he was changing into some deathless force. But just then the Cuban stiffened. Then he relaxed, and Mingolla caught a whiff of feces.

He let the Cuban slump to the floor, but before he could turn loose of the machete, a shudder passed through the body, flowed up the hilt and

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vibrated his left hand. It continued to shudder inside his hand, feeling dirty, sexy, like a post-coital tremor. Something, some animal essence, some oily scrap of bad life, was slithering around in there, squirting toward his wrist. He stared at the hand, horrified. It was gloved in the Cuban's blood, trembling. He smashed it against his hip, and that seemed to stun whatever was inside it. But within seconds it had revived and was wriggling in and out of his fingers with the mad celerity of a tadpole.

"Teo!" someone called. *"Vamos!"*

Electrified by the shout, Mingolla hustled to the door. His foot nudged the Cuban's rifle. He picked it up, and the shaking of his hand lessened—he had the idea it had been soothed by a familiar texture and weight.

"Teo! Donde estas?"

Mingolla had no good choices, but he realized it would be far more dangerous to hang back than to take the initiative. He grunted *"Aqui!"* and walked out into the tunnel, making lots of noise with his heels.

"Dete prisa, hombre!"

Mingolla opened fire as he rounded the curve, The two Cubans were standing by the entrance to the auxiliary tunnel. Their rifles chattered briefly, sending a harmless spray of bullets off the walls; they whirled, flung out their arms and fell. Mingolla was too shocked by how easy it had been to feel relief. He kept watching, expecting them to do something. Moan, or twitch.

After the echoes of the shots had died, though he could hear the big guns jolting and the crackle of firefights, a heavy silence seemed to fill in through the tunnel, as if his bullets had pierced something that had dammed silence up. The silence made him aware of his isolation. No telling where the battle lines were drawn . . . if, indeed, they existed. It was conceivable that small units had infiltrated every level, that the battle for the Ant Farm was in microcosm the battle for Guatemala: a conflict having no patterns, no real borders, no orderly confrontations, but like a plague could pop up anywhere at any time and kill you. That being the case, his best bet would be to head for the computer center, where friendly forces were sure to be concentrated.

He walked to the entrance and stared at the two dead Cubans. They had fallen blocking his way, and he was hesitant about stepping over them, half-believing they were playing possum, that they would reach up and grab him. The awkward attitudes of their limbs made him think they were holding a difficult pose, waiting for him to try. Their blood looked purple in the red glow of the emergencies, thicker and shinier than ordinary blood. He noted their moles and scars and sores, the crude stitching of their fatigues, gold fillings glinting from their open mouths. It was funny, he could have met these guys while they were alive and

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they might have made only a vague impression; but seeing them dead, he had catalogued their physical worth in a single glance. Maybe, he thought, death revealed your essentials as life could not. He studied the dead men, wanting to read them. Couple of slim, wiry guys. Nice guys, into rum and the ladies and sports. He'd bet they were baseball players, infielders, a double-play combo. Maybe he should have called to them, Hey, I'm a Yankee fan. Be cool! Meet'cha after the war for a game of flies and grounders. Fuck this killing shit. Let's play some ball.

He laughed, and the high, cracking sound of his laughter startled him. Christ! Standing around here was just asking for it. As if to second that opinion, the thing inside his hand exploded into life, eeling and frisking about. Swallowing back his fear, Mingolla stepped over the two dead men, and this time, when nothing clutched at his trouser legs, he felt very, very relieved.

Below Level Six, there was a good deal of mist in the auxiliary tunnel, and from this Mingolla understood that the Cubans had penetrated the hillside, probably with a borer mine. Chances were the hole they had made was somewhere close, and he decided that if he could find it he would use it to get the hell out of the Farm and hide in the jungle. On Level Seven the mist was extremely thick; the emergency lights stained it pale red, giving it the look of surgical cotton packing a huge artery. Scorchmarks from grenade bursts showed on the walls like primitive graphics, and quite a few bodies were visible beside the doorways. Most of them Americans, badly mutilated. Uneasy, Mingolla picked his way among them, and when a man spoke behind him, saying, "Don't move," he let out a hoarse cry and dropped his rifle and spun around, his heart pounding.

A giant of a man—he had to go six-seven, six-eight, with the arms and torso of a weightlifter—was standing in a doorway, training a forty-five at Mingolla's chest. He wore khakis with lieutenant's bars, and his babyish face, though cinched into a frown, gave an impression of gentleness and stolidity: he conjured for Mingolla the image of Ferdinand the Bull weighing a knotty problem. "I told you not to move," he said peevishly.

"It's okay," said Mingolla. "I'm on your side."

The lieutenant ran a hand through his thick shock of brown hair; he seemed to be blinking more than was normal. "I'd better check," he said. "Let's go down to the storeroom."

"What's to check?" said Mingolla, his paranoia increasing.

"Please!" said the lieutenant, a genuine wealth of entreaty in his voice. "There's been too much violence already."

The storeroom was a long, narrow L-shaped room at the end of the level; it was ranged by packing crates, and through the gauzy mist the

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emergency lights looked like a string of dying red suns. The lieutenant marched Mingolla to the corner of the L, and turning it, Mingolla saw that the rear wall of the room was missing. A tunnel had been blown into the hillside, opening onto blackness. Forked roots with balls of dirt attached hung from its roof, giving it the witchy appearance of a tunnel into some world of dark magic; rubble and clods of earth were piled at its lip. Mingolla could smell the jungle, and he realized that the big guns had stopped firing. Which meant that whoever had won the battle of the summit would soon be sending down mop-up squads. "We can't stay here," he told the lieutenant. "The Cubans'll be back."

"We're perfectly safe," said the lieutenant. "Take my word." He motioned with the gun, indicating that Mingolla should sit on the floor.

Mingolla did as ordered and was frozen by the sight of a corpse, a Cuban corpse, lying between two packing crates opposite him, its head propped against the wall. "Jesus!" he said, coming back up to his knees.

"He won't bite," said the lieutenant. With the lack of self-consciousness of someone squeezing into a subway seat, he settled beside the corpse; the two of them neatly filled the space between the crates, touching elbow to shoulder.

"Hey," said Mingolla, feeling giddy and scattered. "I'm not sitting here with this fucking dead guy, man!"

The lieutenant flourished his gun. "You'll get used to him."

Mingolla eased back to a sitting position, unable to look away from the corpse. Actually, compared to the bodies he had just been stepping over, it was quite presentable. The only signs of damage were blood on its mouth and bushy black beard, and a mire of blood and shredded cloth at the center of its chest. Its beret had slid down at a rakish angle to cover one eyebrow; the brass scorpion pin was scarred and tarnished. Its eyes were open, reflecting glowing red chips of the emergency lights, and this gave it a baleful semblance of life. But the reflections made it appear less real, easier to bear.

"Listen to me," said the lieutenant.

Mingolla rubbed at the blood on his shaking hand, hoping that cleaning it would have some good effect.

"Are you listening?" the lieutenant asked.

Mingolla had a peculiar perception of the lieutenant and the corpse as dummy and ventriloquist. Despite its glowing eyes, the corpse had too much reality for any trick of the light to gloss over for long. Precise crescents showed on its fingernails, and because its head was tipped to the left, blood had settled into that side, darkening its cheek and temple, leaving the rest of the face pallid. It was the lieutenant, with his neat khakis and polished shoes and nice haircut, who now looked less than real.

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"Listen!" said the lieutenant vehemently. "I want you to understand that I have to do what's right for me!" The bicep of his gun arm bunched to the size of a cannonball.

"I understand," said Mingolla, thoroughly unnerved.

"Do you? Do you really?" The lieutenant seemed aggravated by Mingolla's claim to understanding. "I doubt it. I doubt you could possibly understand."

"Maybe I can't," said Mingolla. "Whatever you say, man. I'm just trying to get along, y'know."

The lieutenant sat silent, blinking. Then he smiled. "My name's Jay," he said. "And you are . . . ?"

"David." Mingolla tried to bring his concentration to bear on the gun, wondering if he could kick it away, but the sliver of life in his hand distracted him.

"Where are your quarters, David?"

"Level Three."

"I live here," said Jay. "But I'm going to move. I couldn't bear to stay in a place where . . ." He broke off and leaned forward, adopting a conspiratorial stance. "Did you know it takes a long time for someone to die, even after their heart has stopped?"

"No, I didn't." The thing in Mingolla's hand squirmed toward his wrist, and he squeezed the wrist, trying to block it.

"It's true," said Jay with vast assurance. "None of these people"—he gave the corpse a gentle nudge with his elbow, a gesture that conveyed to Mingolla a creepy sort of familiarity—"have finished dying. Life doesn't just switch off. It fades. And these people are still alive, though it's only a half-life." He grinned. "The half-life of life, you might say."

Mingolla kept the pressure on his wrist and smiled, as if in appreciation of the play on words. Pale red tendrils of mist curled between them.

"Of course you aren't attuned," said Jay. "So you wouldn't understand. But I'd be lost without Eligio."

"Who's Eligio?"

Jay nodded toward the corpse. "We're attuned, Eligio and I. That's how I know we're safe. Eligio's perceptions aren't limited to the here and now any longer. He's with his men at this very moment, and he tells me they're all dead or dying."

"Uh-huh," said Mingolla, tensing. He had managed to squeeze the thing in his hand back into his fingers, and he thought he might be able to reach the gun. But Jay disrupted his plan by shifting the gun to his other hand. His eyes seemed to be growing more reflective, acquiring a ruby glaze, and Mingolla realized this was because he had opened them wide and angled his stare toward the emergency lights.

"It makes you wonder," said Jay. "It really does."

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"What?" said Mingolla, easing sideways, shortening the range for a kick.

"Half-lives," said Jay. "If the mind has a half-life, maybe our separate emotions do, too. The half-life of love, of hate. Maybe they still exist somewhere." He drew up his knees, shielding the gun. "Anyway, I can't stay here. I think I'll go back to Oakland." His tone became whispery. "Where are you from, David?"

"New York."

"Not my cup of tea," said Jay. "But I love the Bay Area. I own an antique shop there. It's beautiful in the mornings. Peaceful. The sun comes through the window, creeping across the floor, y'know, like a tide, inching up over the furniture. It's as if the original varnishes are being reborn, the whole shop shining with ancient lights."

"Sounds nice," said Mingolla, taken aback by Jay's lyricism.

"You seem like a good person." Jay straightened up a bit. "But I'm sorry. Eligio tells me your mind's too cloudy for him to read. He says I can't risk keeping you alive. I'm going to have to shoot."

Mingolla set himself to kick, but then listlessness washed over him. What the hell did it matter? Even if he knocked the gun away, Jay could probably break him in half. "Why?" he said. "Why do you have to?"

"You might inform on me." Jay's soft features sagged into a sorrowful expression. "Tell them I was hiding."

"Nobody gives a shit you were hiding," said Mingolla. "That's what I was doing. I bet there's fifty other guys doing the same damn thing."

"I don't know." Jay's brow furrowed. "I'll ask again. Maybe your mind's less cloudy now." He turned his gaze to the dead man.

Mingolla noticed that the Cuban's irises were angled upward and to the left—exactly the same angle to which Jay's eyes had drifted earlier—and reflected an identical ruby glaze.

"Sorry," said Jay, leveling the gun. "I have to." He licked his lips. "Would you please turn your head? I'd rather you weren't looking at me when it happens. That's how Eligio and I became attuned."

Looking into the aperture of the gun's muzzle was like peering over a cliff, feeling the chill allure of falling and, it was more out of contrariness than a will to survive that Mingolla popped his eyes at Jay and said, "Go ahead."

Jay blinked but he held the gun steady. "Your hand's shaking," he said after a pause.

"No shit," said Mingolla.

"How come it's shaking?"

"Because I killed someone with it," said Mingolla. "Because I'm as fucking crazy as you are."

Jay mulled this over. "I was supposed to be assigned to a gay unit,"

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he said finally. "But all the slots were filled, and when I had to be assigned here they gave me a drug. Now I . . . I . . ." He blinked rapidly, his lips parted, and Mingolla found that he was straining toward Jay, wanting to apply Body English, to do something to push him over this agonizing hump. "I can't . . . be with men anymore," Jay finished, and once again blinked rapidly; then his words came easier. "Did they give you a drug, too? I mean I'm not trying to imply you're gay. It's just they have drugs for everything these days, and I thought that might be the problem."

Mingolla was suddenly, inutterably sad. He felt that his emotions had been twisted into a thin black wire, that the wire was frayed and spraying black sparks of sadness. That was all that energized him, all his life. Those little black sparks.

"I always fought before," said Jay. "And I was fighting this time. But when I shot Eligio . . . I just couldn't keep going."

"I really don't give a shit," said Mingolla. "I really don't."

"Maybe I *can* trust you." Jay sighed. "I just wish you were attuned. Eligio's a good soul. You'd appreciate him."

Jay kept on talking, enumerating Eligio's virtues, and Mingolla tuned him out, not wanting to hear about the Cuban's love for his family, his posthumous concerns for them. Staring at his bloody hand, he had a magical overview of the situation. Sitting in the root cellar of this evil mountain, bathed in an eerie red glow, a scrap of a dead man's life trapped in his flesh, listening to a deranged giant who took his orders from a corpse, waiting for scorpion soldiers to pour through a tunnel that appeared to lead into a dimension of mist and blackness. It was insane to look at it that way. But there it was. You couldn't reason it away; it had a brutal glamour that surpassed reason, that made reason unnecessary.

". . . and once you're attuned," Jay was saying, "you can't ever be separated. Not even by death. So Eligio's always going to be alive inside me. Of course I can't let them find out. I mean"—he chuckled, a sound like dice rattling in a cup—"talk about giving aid and comfort to the enemy!"

Mingolla lowered his head, closed his eyes. Maybe Jay would shoot. But he doubted that. Jay only wanted company in his madness.

"You swear you won't tell them?" Jay asked.

"Yeah," said Mingolla. "I swear."

"All right," said Jay. "But remember, my future's in your hands. You have a responsibility to me."

"Don't worry."

Gunfire crackled in the distance.

"I'm glad we could talk," said Jay. "I feel much better."

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Mingolla said that he felt better, too.

They sat without speaking. It wasn't the most secure way to pass the night, but Mingolla no longer put any store in the concept of security. He was too weary to be afraid. Jay seemed entranced, staring at a point above Mingolla's head, but Mingolla made no move for the gun. He was content to sit and wait and let fate take its course. His thoughts uncoiled with vegetable sluggishness.

They must have been sitting a couple of hours when Mingolla heard the whisper of helicopters and noticed that the mist had thinned, that the darkness at the end of the tunnel had gone gray. "Hey," he said to Jay. "I think we're okay now." Jay offered no reply, and Mingolla saw that his eyes were angled upward and to the left just like the Cuban's eyes, glazed over with ruby reflection. Tentatively, he reached out and touched the gun. Jay's hand flopped to the floor, but his fingers remained clenched around the butt. Mingolla recoiled, disbelieving. It couldn't be! Again he reached out, feeling for a pulse. Jay's wrist was cool, still, and his lips had a bluish cast. Mingolla had a flutter of hysteria, thinking that Jay had gotten it wrong about being attuned: instead of Eligio becoming part of his life, he had become part of Eligio's death. There was a tightness in Mingolla's chest, and he thought he was going to cry. He would have welcomed tears, and when they failed to materialize he grew both annoyed at himself and defensive. Why should he cry? The guy had meant nothing to him . . . though the fact that he could be so devoid of compassion was reason enough for tears. Still, if you were going to cry over something as commonplace as a single guy dying, you'd be crying every minute of the day, and what was the future in that? He glanced at Jay. At the Cuban. Despite the smoothness of Jay's skin, the Cuban's bushy beard, Mingolla could have sworn they were starting to resemble each other the way old married couples did. And, yep, all four eyes were fixed on exactly the same point of forever. It was either a hell of a coincidence or else Jay's craziness had been of such magnitude that he had willed himself to die in this fashion just to lend credence to his theory of half-lives. And maybe he was still alive. Half alive. Maybe he and Mingolla were now attuned, and if that were true, maybe . . . Revolted by the prospect of joining Jay and the Cuban in their deathwatch, Mingolla scrambled to his feet and ran into the tunnel. He might have kept running, but on coming out into the dawn light he was brought up short by the view from the tunnel entrance.

At his back, the green dome of the hill swelled high, its sides brocaded with shrubs and vines, an infinity of pattern as eye-catching as the intricately carved facade of a Hindu temple; atop it, one of the gun emplacements had taken a hit: splinters of charred metal curved up like peels of black rind. Before him lay the moat of red dirt with its hedgerows

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of razor wire, and beyond that loomed the blackish-green snarl of the jungle. Caught on the wire were hundreds of baggy shapes wearing blood-stained fatigues; frays of smoke twisted up from the fresh craters beside them. Overhead, half-hidden by the lifting gray mist, three Sikorskys were hovering. Their pilots were invisible behind layers of mist and reflection, and the choppers themselves looked like enormous carrion flies with bulging eyes and whirling wings. Like devils. Like gods. They seemed to be whispering to one another in anticipation of the feast they were soon to share.

The scene was horrid yet it had the purity of a stanza from a ballad come to life, a ballad composed about tragic events in some border hell. You could never paint it, or if you could the canvas would have to be as large as the scene itself, and you would have to incorporate the slow boil of the mist, the whirling of the chopper blades, the drifting smoke. No detail could be omitted. It was the perfect illustration of the war, of its secret magical splendor, and Mingolla, too, was an element of the design, the figure of the artist painted in for a joke or to lend scale and perspective to its vastness, its importance. He knew that he should report to his station, but he couldn't turn away from this glimpse into the heart of the war. He sat down on the hillside, cradling his sick hand in his lap, and watched as—with the ponderous aplomb of idols floating to earth, fighting the cross-draft, the wind of their descent whipping up furies of red dust—the Sikorskys made skillful landings among the dead.

4

Halfway through the telling of his story, Mingolla had realized that he was not really trying to offend or shock Debora, but rather was unburdening himself; and he further realized that by telling it he had to an extent cut loose from the past, weakened its hold on him. For the first time he felt able to give serious consideration to the idea of desertion. He did not rush to it, embrace it, but he did acknowledge its logic and understand the terrible illogic of returning to more assaults, more death, without any magic to protect him. He made a pact with himself: he would pretend to go along as if desertion were his intent and see what signs were offered.

When he had finished, Debora asked whether or not he was over his anger. He was pleased that she hadn't tried to offer sympathy. "I'm sorry," he said. "I wasn't really angry at you . . . at least that was only part of it."

"It's all right." She pushed back the dark mass of her hair so that it fell to one side and looked down at the grass beside her knees. With her

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head inclined, eyes half-lidded, the graceful line of her neck and chin like a character in some exotic script, she seemed a good sign herself. "I don't know what to talk to you about," she said. "The things I feel I have to tell you make you mad, and I can't muster any small-talk."

"I don't want to be pushed," he said. "But believe me, I'm thinking about what you've told me."

"I won't push. But I still don't know what to talk about." She plucked a grass blade, chewed on the tip. He watched her lips purse, wondered how she'd taste. Mouth sweet in the way of a jar that had once held spices. She tossed the grass blade aside. "I know," she said brightly. "Would you like to see where I live?"

"I'd just as soon not go back to 'Frisco yet." Where you live, he thought; I want to touch where you live.

"It's not in town," she said. "It's a village downriver."

"Sounds good." He came to his feet, took her arm and helped her up. For an instant they were close together, her breasts grazing his shirt. Her heat coursed around him, and he thought if anyone were to see them, they would see two figures wavering as in a mirage. He had an urge to tell her he loved her. Though most of what he felt was for the salvation she might provide, part of his feelings seemed real and that puzzled him, because all she had been to him was a few hours out of the war, dinner in a cheap restaurant and a walk along the river. There was no basis for consequential emotion. Before he could say anything, do anything, she turned and picked up her basket.

"It's not far," she said, walking away. Her blue skirt swayed like a rung bell.

They followed a track of brown clay overgrown by ferns, overspread by saplings with pale translucent leaves, and soon came to a grouping of thatched huts at the mouth of a stream that flowed into the river. Naked children were wading in the stream, laughing and splashing each other. Their skins were the color of amber, and their eyes were as wet-looking and purplish-dark as plums. Palms and acacias loomed above the huts, which were constructed of sapling trunks lashed together by nylon cord; their thatch had been trimmed to resemble bowl-cut hair. Flies crawled over strips of meat hung on a clothesline stretched between two of the huts. Fish heads and chicken droppings littered the ocher ground. But Mingolla scarcely noticed these signs of poverty, seeing instead a sign of the peace that might await him in Panama. And another sign was soon forthcoming. Debora bought a bottle of rum at a tiny store, then led him to the hut nearest the mouth of the stream and introduced him to a lean, white-haired old man who was sitting on a bench outside it. Tio Moises. After three drinks Tio Moises began to tell stories.

The first story concerned the personal pilot of an ex-president of Pan-

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ama. The president had made billions from smuggling cocaine into the States with the help of the CIA, whom he had assisted on numerous occasions, and was himself an addict in the last stages of mental deterioration. It had become his sole pleasure to be flown from city to city in his country, to sit on the landing strips, gaze out the window and do cocaine. At any hour of night or day, he was likely to call the pilot and order him to prepare a flight plan to Colon or Bocas del Toro or Penonome. As the president's condition worsened, the pilot realized that soon the CIA would see he was no longer useful and would kill him. And the most obvious manner of killing him would be by means of an airplane crash. The pilot did not want to die alongside him. He tried to resign, but the president would not permit it. He gave thought to mutilating himself, but being a good Catholic, he could not flout God's law. If he were to flee, his family would suffer. His life became a nightmare. Prior to each flight, he would spend hours searching the plane for evidence of sabotage, and upon each landing, he would remain in the cockpit, shaking from nervous exhaustion. The president's condition grew even worse. He had to be carried aboard the plane and have the cocaine administered by an aide, while a second aide stood by with cotton swabs to attend his nosebleeds. Knowing his life could be measured in weeks, the pilot asked his priest for guidance. "Pray," the priest advised. The pilot had been praying all along, so this was no help. Next he went to the commandant of his military college, and the commandant told him he must do his duty. This, too, was something the pilot had been doing all along. Finally he went to the chief of the San Blas Indians, who were his mother's people. The chief told him he must accept his fate, which—while not something he had been doing all along—was hardly encouraging. Nonetheless, he saw it was the only available path and he did as the chief had counseled. Rather than spending hours in a pre-flight check, he would arrive minutes before take-off and taxi away without even inspecting the fuel gauge. His recklessness came to be the talk of the capitol. Obeying the president's every whim, he flew in gales and in fogs, while drunk and drugged, and during those hours in the air, suspended between the laws of gravity and fate, he gained a new appreciation of life. Once back on the ground, he engaged in living with a fierce avidity, making passionate love to his wife, carousing with friends and staying out until dawn. Then one day as he was preparing to leave for the airport, an American man came to his house and told him he had been replaced. "If we let the president fly with so negligent a pilot, we'll be blamed for anything that happens," said the American. The pilot did not have to ask whom he had meant by "we." Six weeks later the president's plane crashed in the Darien Mountains. The pilot was overjoyed. Panama had been ridded of a villain, and his own life had not been forfeited. But a week after the crash, after

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the new president—another smuggler with CIA connections—had been appointed, the commandant of the air force summoned the pilot, told him that the crash would never have occurred had he been on the job, and assigned him to fly the new president's plane.

All through the afternoon Mingolla listened and drank, and drunkenness fitted a lens to his eyes that let him see how these stories applied to him. They were all fables of irresolution, cautioning him to act, and they detailed the core problems of the Central American people who—as he was now—were trapped between the poles of magic and reason, their lives governed by the politics of the ultra-real, their spirits ruled by myths and legends, with the rectangular computerized bulk of North America above and the conch-shell-shaped continental mystery of South America below. He assumed that Debora had orchestrated the types of stories Tio Moises told, but that did not detract from their potency as signs: they had the ring of truth, not of something tailored to his needs. Nor did it matter that his hand was shaking, his vision playing tricks. Those things would pass when he reached Panama.

Shadows blurred, insects droned like tambouras, and twilight washed down the sky, making the air look grainy, the chop on the river appear slower and heavier. Tio Moises' granddaughter served plates of roast corn and fish, and Mingolla stuffed himself. Afterward, when the old man signaled his weariness, Mingolla and Debora strolled off along the stream. Between two of the huts, mounted on a pole, was a warped backboard with a netless hoop, and some young men were shooting baskets. Mingolla joined them. It was hard dribbling on the bumpy dirt, but he had never played better. The residue of drunkenness fueled his game, and his jump shots followed perfect arcs down through the hoop. Even at improbable angles, his shots fell true. He lost himself in flicking out his hands to make a steal, in feinting and leaping high to snag a rebound, becoming—as dusk faded—the most adroit of ten arm-waving, jitter-stepping shadows.

The game ended and the stars came out, looking like holes punched into fire through a billow of black silk overhanging the palms. Flickering chutes of lamplight illuminated the ground in front of the huts, and as Debora and Mingolla walked among them, he heard a radio tuned to the Armed Forces Network giving a play-by-play of a baseball game. There was a crack of the bat, the crowd roared, the announcer cried, "He got it all!" Mingolla imagined the ball vanishing into the darkness above the stadium, bouncing out into parking-lot America, lodging under a tire where some kid would find it and think it a miracle, or rolling across the street to rest under a used car, shimmering there, secretly white and fuming with home run energies. The score was three-to-one, top of the second. Mingolla didn't know who was playing and didn't care. Home

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runs were happening for him, mystical jump shots curved along predestined tracks. He was at the center of incalculable forces.

One of the huts was unlit, with two wooden chairs out front, and as they approached, the sight of it blighted Mingolla's mood. Something about it bothered him: its air of preparedness, of being a little stage set. Just paranoia, he thought. The signs had been good so far, hadn't they? When they reached the hut, Debora sat in the chair nearest the door and looked up at him. Starlight pointed her eyes with brilliance. Behind her, through the doorway, he made out the shadowy cocoon of a strung hammock, and beneath it, a sack from which part of a wire cage protruded. "What about your game?" he asked.

"I thought it was more important to be with you," she said.

That, too, bothered him. It was all starting to bother him, and he couldn't understand why. The thing in his hand wiggled. He balled the hand into a fist and sat next to Debora. "What's going on between you and me?" he asked, nervous. "Is anything gonna happen? I keep thinking it will, but . . ." He wiped sweat from his forehead and forgot what he had been driving at.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she said.

A shadow moved across the yellow glare spilling from the hut next door. Rippling, undulating. Mingolla squeezed his eyes shut.

"If you mean . . . romantically," she said, "I'm confused about that myself. Whether you return to your base or go to Panama, we don't seem to have much of a future. And we certainly don't have much of a past."

It boosted his confidence in her, in the situation, that she didn't have an assured answer. But he felt shaky. Very shaky. He gave his head a twitch, fighting off more ripples. "What's it like in Panama?"

"I've never been there. Probably a lot like Guatemala, except without the fighting."

Maybe he should get up, walk around. Maybe that would help. Or maybe he should just sit and talk. Talking seemed to steady him. "I bet," he said, "I bet it's beautiful, y'know. Panama. Green mountains, jungle waterfalls. I bet there's lots of birds. Macaws and parrots. Millions of 'em."

"I suppose so."

"And hummingbirds. This friend of mine was down there once on a hummingbird expedition, said there was a million kinds. I thought he was sort of a creep, y'know, for being into collecting hummingbirds." He opened his eyes and had to close them again. "I guess I thought hummingbird collecting wasn't very relevant to the big issues."

"David?" Concern in her voice.

"I'm okay." The smell of her perfume was more cloying than he remembered. "You get there by boat, right? Must be a pretty big boat. I've

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never been on a real boat, just this rowboat my uncle had. He used to take me fishing off Coney Island, we'd tie up to a buoy and catch all these poison fish. You shoulda seen some of 'em. Like mutants. Rainbow-colored eyes, weird growths all over. Scared the hell outta me to think about eating fish."

"I had an uncle who . . ."

"I used to think about all the ones that must be down there too deep for us to catch. Giant blowfish, genius sharks, whales with hands. I'd see 'em swallowing the boat, I'd . . ."

"Calm down, David." She kneaded the back of his neck, sending a shiver down his spine.

"I'm okay, I'm okay." He pushed her hand away; he did not need shivers along with everything else. "Lemme hear some more 'bout Panama."

"I told you, I've never been there."

"Oh, yeah. Well, how 'bout Costa Rica? You been to Costa Rica." Sweat was popping out all over his body. Maybe he should go for a swim. He'd heard there were manatees in the Rio Dulce. "Ever seen a manatee?" he asked.

"David!"

She must have leaned close, because he could feel her heat spreading all through him, and he thought maybe that would help, smothering in her heat, heavy motion, get rid of this shakiness. He'd take her into that hammock and see just how hot she got. *How* hot *she got, how* hot *she got.* The words did a train rhythm in his head. Afraid to open his eyes, he reached out blindly and pulled her to him. Bumped faces, searched for her mouth. Kissed her. She kissed back. His hand slipped up to cup a breast. Jesus, she felt good! She felt like salvation, like Panama, like what you fall into when you sleep.

But then it changed, changed slowly, so slowly that he didn't notice until it was almost complete, and her tongue was squirming in his mouth, as thick and stupid as a snail's foot, and her breast, oh shit, her breast was jiggling, trembling with the same wormy juices that were in his left hand. He pushed her off, opened his eyes. Saw crude-stitch eyelashes sewn to her cheeks. Lips parted, mouth full of bones. Blank face of meat. He got to his feet, pawing the air, wanting to rip down the film of ugliness that had settled over him.

"David?" She warped his name, gulping the syllables as if she were trying to swallow and talk at once.

Frog voice, devil voice.

He spun around, caught an eyeful of black sky and spiky trees and a pitted bone-knob moon trapped in a weave of branches. Dark warty shapes of the huts, doors into yellow flame with crooked shadow men inside. He blinked, shook his head. It wasn't going away, it was real.

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What was this place? Not a village in Guatemala, naw, un-uh. He heard a strangled wildman grunt come from his throat, and he backed away, backed away from everything. She walked after him, croaking his name. Wig of black straw, dabs of shining jelly for eyes. Some of the shadow men were herky-jerking out of their doors, gathering behind her, talking about him in devil language. Long-legged licorice-skinned demons with drumbeat hearts, faceless nothings from the dimension of sickness. He backed another few steps.

"I can see you," he said. "I know what you are."

"It's all right, David," she said, and smiled.

Sure! She thought he was going to buy the smile, but he wasn't fooled. He saw how it broke over her face the way something rotten melts through the bottom of a wet grocery sack after it's been in the garbage for a week. Gloating smile of the Queen Devil Bitch. She had done this to him, had teamed up with the bad life in his hand and done witchy things to his head. Made him see down to the layer of shit-magic she lived in.

"I see you," he said.

He tripped, went backward flailing, stumbling, and came out of it running toward the town.

Ferns whipped his legs, branches cut at his face. Webs of shadow fettered the trail, and the shrilling insects had the sound of a metal edge being honed. Up ahead, he spotted a big moonstruck tree standing by itself on a rise overlooking the water. A grandfather tree, a white magic tree. It summoned to him. He stopped beside it, sucking air. The moonlight cooled him off, drenched him with silver, and he understood the purpose of the tree. Fountain of whiteness in the dark wood, shining for him alone. He made a fist of his left hand. The thing inside the hand eeled frantically as if it knew what was coming. He studied the deeply grooved, mystic patterns of the bark and found the point of confluence. He steeled himself. Then he drove his fist into the trunk. Brilliant pain lanced up his arm, and he cried out. But he hit the tree again, hit it a third time. He held the hand tight against his body, muffling the pain. It was already swelling, becoming a knuckle-less cartoon hand; but nothing moved inside it. The riverbank, with its rustlings and shadows, no longer menaced him; it had been transformed into a place of ordinary lights, ordinary darks, and even the whiteness of the tree looked unmagically bright.

"David!" Debora's voice, and not far off.

Part of him wanted to wait, to see whether or not she had changed for the innocent, for the ordinary. But he couldn't trust her, couldn't trust himself, and he set out running once again.

* * *

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Mingolla caught the ferry to the west bank, thinking that he would find Gilbey, that a dose of Gilbey's belligerence would ground him in reality. He sat in the bow next to a group of five other soldiers, one of whom was puking over the side, and to avoid a conversation he turned away and looked down into the black water slipping past. Moonlight edged the wavelets with silver, and among those gleams it seemed he could see reflected the broken curve of his life: a kid living for Christmas, drawing pictures, receiving praise, growing up mindless to high school, sex, and drugs, growing beyond that, beginning to draw pictures again, and then, right where you might expect the curve to assume a more meaningful shape, it was sheared off, left hanging, its process demystified and explicable. He realized how foolish the idea of the ritual had been. Like a dying man clutching a vial of holy water, he had clutched at magic when the logic of existence had proved untenable. Now the frail linkages of that magic had been dissolved, and nothing supported him: he was falling through the dark zones of the war, waiting to be snatched by one of its monsters. He lifted his head and gazed at the west bank. The shore toward which he was heading was as black as a bat's wing and inscribed with arcana of violent light. Rooftops and palms were cast in silhouette against a rainbow haze of neon; gassy arcs of blood red and lime green and indigo were visible between them: fragments of glowing beasts. The wind bore screams and wild music. The soldiers beside him laughed and cursed, and the one guy kept on puking. Mingolla rested his forehead on the wooden rail, just to feel something solid.

At the Club Demonio, Gilbey's big-breasted whore was lounging by the bar, staring into her drink. Mingolla pushed through the dancers, through heat and noise and veils of lavender smoke; when he walked up to the whore, she put on a professional smile and made a grab for his crotch. He fended her off. "Where's Gilbey?" he shouted. She gave him a befuddled look; then the light dawned. "Meen-golla?" she said. He nodded. She fumbled in her purse and pulled out a folded paper. "Ees frawm Geel-bee," she said. "Forr me, five dol-larrs."

He handed her the money and took the paper. It proved to be a Christian pamphlet with a pen-and-ink sketch of a rail-thin, aggrieved-looking Jesus on the front, and beneath the sketch, a tract whose first line read, "The last days are in season." He turned it over and found a handwritten note on the back. The note was pure Gilbey. No explanation, no sentiment. Just the basics.

> I'm gone to Panama. You want to make that trip, check out a guy named Ruy Barros in Livingston. He'll fix you up. Maybe I'll see you.
>
> G.

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Mingolla had believed that his confusion had peaked, but the fact of Gilbey's desertion wouldn't fit inside his head, and when he tried to make it fit he was left more confused than ever. It wasn't that he couldn't understand what had happened. He understood it perfectly; he might have predicted it. Like a crafty rat who had seen his favorite hole blocked by a trap, Gilbey had simply chewed a new hole and vanished through it. The thing that confused Mingolla was his total lack of referents. He and Gilbey and Baylor had seemed to triangulate reality, to locate each other within a coherent map of duties and places and events; and now that they were both gone, Mingolla felt utterly bewildered. Outside the club, he let the crowds push him along and gazed up at the neon animals atop the bars. Giant blue rooster, green bull, golden turtle with fiery red eyes. Great identities regarding him with disfavor. Bleeds of color washed from the signs, staining the air to a garish paleness, giving everyone a mealy complexion. Amazing, Mingolla thought, that you could breathe such grainy discolored stuff, that it didn't start you choking. It was all amazing, all nonsensical. Everything he saw struck him as unique and unfathomable, even the most commonplace of sights. He found himself staring at people—at whores, at street kids, at an MP who was talking to another MP, patting the fender of his jeep as if it were his big olive-drab pet—and trying to figure out what they were really doing, what special significance their actions held for him, what clues they presented that might help him unravel the snarl of his own existence. At last, realizing that he needed peace and quiet, he set out toward the airbase, thinking he would find an empty bunk and sleep off his confusion; but when he came to the cut-off that led to the unfinished bridge, he turned down it, deciding that he wasn't ready to deal with gate sentries and duty officers. Dense thickets buzzing with insects narrowed the cut-off to a path, and at its end stood a line of sawhorses. He climbed over them and soon was mounting a sharply inclined curve that appeared to lead to a point not far below the lumpish silver moon.

Despite a litter of rubble and cardboard sheeting, the concrete looked pure under the moon, blazing bright, like a fragment of snowy light not quite hardened to the material; and as he ascended he thought he could feel the bridge trembling to his footsteps with the sensitivity of a white nerve. He seemed to be walking into darkness and stars, a solitude the size of creation. It felt good and damn lonely, maybe a little too much so, with the wind flapping pieces of cardboard and the sounds of the insects left behind.

After a few minutes he glimpsed the ragged terminus ahead. When he reached it, he sat down carefully, letting his legs dangle. Wind keened through the exposed girders, tugging at his ankles; his hand throbbed and was fever-hot. Below, multicolored brilliance clung to the black

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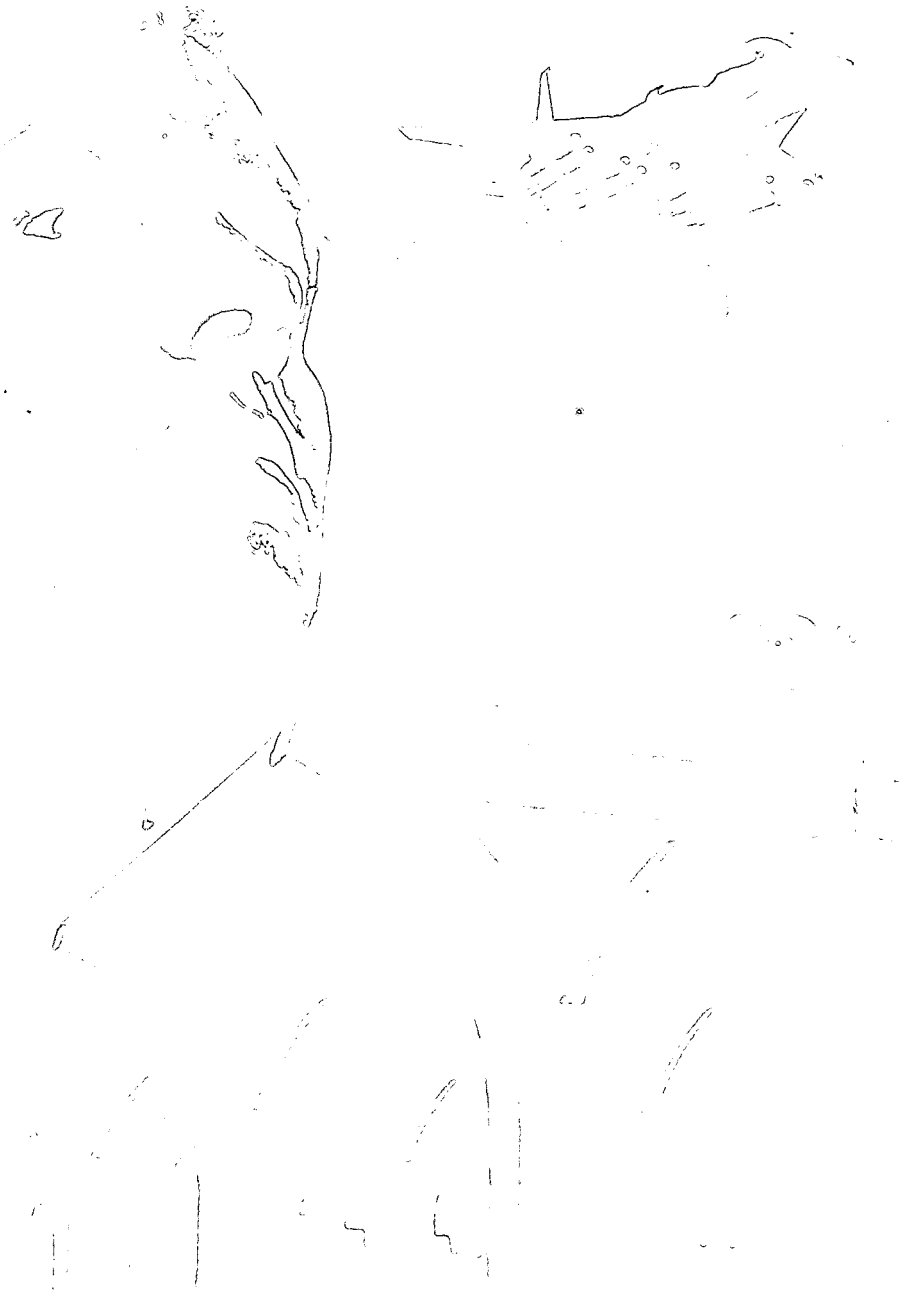

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margin of the east bank like a colony of bioluminescent algae. He wondered how high he was. Not high enough, he thought. Faint music was fraying on the wind—the inexhaustible delirium of San Francisco de Juticlan—and he imagined that the flickering of the stars was caused by this thin smoke of music drifting across them.

He tried to think what to do. Not much occurred to him. He pictured Gilbey in Panama. Whoring, drinking, fighting. Doing just as he had in Guatemala. That was where the idea of desertion failed Mingolla. In Panama he would be afraid; in Panama, though his hand might not shake, some other malignant twitch would develop; in Panama he would resort to magical cures for his afflictions, because he would be too imperiled by the real to derive strength from it. And eventually the war would come to Panama. Desertion would have gained him nothing. He stared out across the moon-silvered jungle, and it seemed that some essential part of him was pouring from his eyes, entering the flow of the wind and rushing away past the Ant Farm and its smoking craters, past guerrilla territory, past the seamless join of sky and horizon, being irresistibly pulled toward a point into which the world's vitality was emptying. He felt himself emptying as well, growing cold and vacant and slow. His brain became incapable of thought, capable only of recording perceptions. The wind brought green scents that made his nostrils flare. The sky's blackness folded around him, and the stars were golden pinpricks of sensation. He didn't sleep, but something in him slept.

A whisper drew him back from the edge of the world. At first he thought it had been his imagination, and he continued staring at the sky, which had lightened to the vivid blue of pre-dawn. Then he heard it again and glanced behind him. Strung out across the bridge, about twenty feet away, were a dozen or so children. Some standing, some crouched. Most were clad in rags, a few wore coverings of vines and leaves, and others were naked. Watchful; silent. Knives glinted in their hands. They were all emaciated, their hair long and matted, and Mingolla, recalling the dead children he had seen that morning, was for a moment afraid. But only for a moment. Fear flared in him like a coal puffed to life by a breeze and died an instant later, suppressed not by any rational accommodation but by a perception of those ragged figures as an opportunity for surrender. He wasn't eager to die, yet neither did he want to put forth more effort in the cause of survival. Survival, he had learned, was not the soul's ultimate priority. He kept staring at the children. The way they were posed reminded him of a Neanderthal grouping in the Museum of Natural History. The moon was still up, and they cast vaguely defined shadows like smudges of graphite. Finally Mingolla turned away; the horizon was showing a distinct line of green darkness.

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He had expected to be stabbed or pushed, to pinwheel down and break against the Rio Dulce, its waters gone a steely color beneath the brightening sky. But instead a voice spoke in his ear: "Hey, macho." Squatting beside him was a boy of fourteen or fifteen, with a swarthy monkeylike face framed by tangles of shoulder-length dark hair. Wearing tattered shorts. Coiled serpent tattooed on his brow. He tipped his head to one side, then the other. Perplexed. He might have been trying to see the true Mingolla through layers of false appearance. He made a growly noise in his throat and held up a knife, twisting it this way and that, letting Mingolla observe its keen edge, how it channeled the moonlight along its blade. An army-issue survival knife with a brass-knuckle grip. Mingolla gave an amused sniff.

The boy seemed alarmed by this reaction; he lowered the knife and shifted away. "What you doing here, man?" he asked.

A number of answers occurred to Mingolla, most demanding too much energy to voice; he chose the simplest. "I like it here. I like the bridge."

The boy squinted at Mingolla. "The bridge is magic," he said. "You know this?"

"There was a time I might have believed you," said Mingolla.

"You got to talk slow, man." The boy frowned. "Too fast, I can't understan'."

Mingolla repeated his comment, and the boy said, "You believe it, gringo. Why else you here?" With a planing motion of his arm he described an imaginary continuance of the bridge's upward course. "That's where the bridge travels now. Don't have not'ing to do wit' crossing the river. It's a piece of white stone. Don't mean the same t'ing a bridge means."

Mingolla was surprised to hear his thoughts echoed by someone who so resembled a hominid.

"I come here," the boy went on. "I listen to the wind, hear it sing in the iron. And I know t'ings from it. I can see the future." He grinned, exposing blackened teeth, and pointed south toward the Caribbean. "Future's that way, man."

Mingolla liked the joke; he felt an affinity for the boy, for anyone who could manage jokes from the boy's perspective, but he couldn't think of a way to express his good feeling. Finally he said, "You speak English well."

"Shit! What you think? 'Cause we live in the jungle, we talk like animals? Shit!" The boy jabbed the point of his knife into the concrete. "I talk English all my life. Gringos they too stupid to learn Spanish."

A girl's voice sounded behind them, harsh and peremptory. The other children had closed to within ten feet, their savage faces intent upon Mingolla, and the girl was standing a bit forward of them. She had

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sunken cheeks and deep-set eyes; ratty cables of hair hung down over her single-scoop breasts. Her hipbones tented up a rag of a skirt, which the wind pushed back between her legs. The boy let her finish, then gave a prolonged response, punctuating his words by smashing the brass-knuckle grip of his knife against the concrete, striking sparks with every blow.

"Gracela," he said to Mingolla, "she wants to kill you. But I say, some men they got one foot in the worl' of death, and if you kill them, death will take you, too. And you know what?"

"What?" said Mingolla.

"It's true. You and death"—the boy clasped his hands—"like this."

"Maybe," Mingolla said.

"No 'maybe.' The bridge tol' me. Tol' me I be t'ankful if I let you live. So you be t'ankful to the bridge. That magic you don' believe, it save your ass." The boy lowered out of his squat and sat cross-legged. "Gracela, she don' care 'bout you live or die. She jus' go 'gainst me 'cause when I leave here, she going to be chief. She's, you know, impatient."

Mingolla looked at the girl. She met his gaze coldly: a witch-child with slitted eyes, bramble hair, and ribs poking out. "Where are you going?" he asked the boy.

"I have a dream I will live in the south; I dream I own a warehouse full of gold and cocaine."

The girl began to harangue him again, and he shot back a string of angry syllables.

"What did you say?" Mingolla asked.

"I say, 'Gracela, you give me shit, I going to fuck you and t'row you in the river.' " He winked at Mingolla. "Gracela she a virgin, so she worry 'bout that firs' t'ing."

The sky was graying, pink streaks fading in from the east; birds wheeled up from the jungle below, forming into flocks above the river. In the half-light Mingolla saw that the boy's chest was cross-hatched with ridged scars: knife wounds that hadn't received proper treatment. Bits of vegetation were trapped in his hair, like primitive adornments.

"Tell me, gringo," said the boy. "I hear in America there is a machine wit' the soul of a man. This is true?"

"More or less," said Mingolla.

The boy nodded gravely, his suspicions confirmed. "I hear also America has builded a metal worl' in the sky."

"They're building it now."

"In the house of your president, is there a stone that holds the mind of a dead magician?"

Mingolla gave this due consideration. "I doubt it," he said. "But it's possible."

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Wind thudded against the bridge, startling him. He felt its freshness on his face and relished the sensation. That—the fact that he could still take simple pleasure from life—startled him more than had the sudden noise.

The pink streaks in the east were deepening to crimson and fanning wider; shafts of light pierced upward to stain the bellies of some low-lying clouds to mauve. Several of the children began to mutter in unison. A chant. They were speaking in Spanish, but the way their voices jumbled the words, it sounded guttural and malevolent, a language for trolls. Listening to them, Mingolla imagined them crouched around fires in bamboo thickets. Bloody knives lifted sunwards over their fallen prey. Making love in the green nights among fleshy Rousseau-like vegetation, while pythons with ember eyes coiled in the branches above their heads.

"Truly, gringo," said the boy, apparently still contemplating Mingolla's answers. "These are evil times." He stared gloomily down at the river; the wind shifted the heavy snarls of his hair.

Watching him, Mingolla grew envious. Despite the bleakness of his existence, this little monkey king was content with his place in the world, assured of its nature. Perhaps he was deluded, but Mingolla envied his delusion, and he especially envied his dream of gold and cocaine. His own dreams had been dispersed by the war. The idea of sitting and daubing colors onto canvas no longer held any real attraction for him. Nor did the thought of returning to New York. Though survival had been his priority all these months, he had never stopped to consider what survival portended, and now he did not believe he could return. He had, he realized, become acclimated to the war, able to breathe its toxins; he would gag on the air of peace and home. The war was his new home, his newly rightful place.

Then the truth of this struck him with the force of an illumination, and he understood what he had to do.

Baylor and Gilbey had acted according to their natures, and he would have to act according to his, which imposed upon him the path of acceptance. He remembered Tio Moises' story about the pilot and laughed inwardly. In a sense his friend—the guy he had mentioned in his unsent letter—had been right about the war, about the world. It was full of designs, patterns, coincidences, and cycles that appeared to indicate the workings of some magical power. But these things were the result of a subtle natural process. The longer you lived, the wider your experience, the more complicated your life became, and eventually you were bound in the midst of so many interactions, a web of circumstance and emotion and event, that nothing was simple anymore and everything was subject to interpretation. Interpretation, however, was a waste of time. Even the most logical of interpretations was merely an attempt to herd mystery

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into a cage and lock the door on it. It made life no less mysterious. And it was equally pointless to seize upon patterns, to rely on them, to obey the mystical regulations they seemed to imply. Your one effective course had to be entrenchment. You had to admit to mystery, to the incomprehensibility of your situation, and protect yourself against it. Shore up your web, clear it of blind corners, set alarms. You had to plan aggressively. You had to become the monster in your own maze, as brutal and devious as the fate you sought to escape. It was the kind of militant acceptance that Tio Moises' pilot had not had the opportunity to display, that Mingolla himself—though the opportunity had been his—had failed to display. He saw that now. He had merely reacted to danger and had not challenged or used forethought against it. But he thought he would be able to do that now.

He turned to the boy, thinking he might appreciate this insight into "magic," and caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. Gracela. Coming up behind the boy, her knife held low, ready to stab. In reflex, Mingolla flung out his injured hand to block her. The knife nicked the edge of his hand, deflected upward and sliced the top of the boy's shoulder.

The pain in Mingolla's hand was excruciating, blinding him momentarily; and then as he grabbed Gracela's forearm to prevent her from stabbing again, he felt another sensation, one almost covered by the pain. He had thought the thing inside his hand was dead, but now he could feel it fluttering at the edges of the wound, leaking out in the rich trickle of blood that flowed over his wrist. It was trying to worm back inside, wriggling against the flow, but the pumping of his heart was too strong, and soon it was gone, dripping on the the white stone of the bridge.

Before he could feel relief or surprise or any way absorb what had happened, Gracela tried to pull free. Mingolla got to his knees, dragged her down and dashed her knife hand against the bridge. The knife skittered away. Gracela struggled wildly, clawing at his face, and the other children edged forward. Mingolla levered his left arm under Gracela's chin, choking her; with his right hand, he picked up the knife and pressed the point into her breast. The children stopped their advance, and Gracela went limp. He could feel her trembling. Tears streaked the grime on her cheeks. She looked like a scared little girl, not a witch.

"Puta!" said the boy. He had come to his feet, holding his shoulder, and was staring daggers at Gracela.

"Is it bad?" Mingolla asked. "The shoulder?"

The boy inspected the bright blood on his fingertips. "It hurts," he said. He stepped over to stand in front of Gracela and smiled down at her; he unbuttoned the top button of his shorts.

Gracela tensed.

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"What are you doing?" Mingolla suddenly felt responsible for the girl.

"I going to do what I tol' her, man." The boy undid the rest of the buttons and shimmied out of his shorts; he was already half-erect, as if the violence had aroused him.

"No," said Mingolla, realizing as he spoke that this was not at all wise.

"Take your life," said the boy sternly. "Walk away."

A long powerful gust of wind struck the bridge; it seemed to Mingolla that the vibration of the bridge, the beating of his heart, and Gracela's trembling were driven by the same shimmering pulse. He felt an almost visceral commitment to the moment, one that had nothing to do with his concern for the girl. Maybe, he thought, it was an implementation of his new convictions.

The boy lost patience. He shouted at the other children, herding them away with slashing gestures. Sullenly, they moved off down the curve of the bridge, positioning themselves along the railing, leaving an open avenue. Beyond them, beneath a lavender sky, the jungle stretched to the horizon, broken only by the rectangular hollow made by the airbase. The boy hunkered at Gracela's feet. "Tonight," he said to Mingolla, "the bridge have set us together. Tonight we sit, we talk. Now, that's over. My heart say to kill you. But 'cause you stop Gracela from cutting deep, I give you a chance. She mus' make a judgmen'. If she say she go wit' you, we"—he waved toward the other children—"will kill you. If she wan' to stay, then you mus' go. No more talk, no bullshit. You jus' go. Understan'?"

Mingolla wasn't afraid, and his lack of fear was not born of an indifference to life, but of clarity and confidence. It was time to stop reacting away from challenges, time to meet them. He came up with a plan. There awas no doubt that Gracela would choose him, choose a chance at life, no matter how slim. But before she could decide, he would kill the boy. Then he would run straight at the others: without their leader, they might not hang together. It wasn't much of a plan and he didn't like the idea of hurting the boy; but he thought he might be able to pull it off. "I understand," he said.

The boy spoke to Gracela; he told Mingolla to release her. She sat up, rubbing the spot where Mingolla had pricked her with the knife. She glanced coyly at him, then at the boy; she pushed her hair back behind her neck and thrust out her breasts as if preening for two suitors. Mingolla was astonished by her behavior. Maybe, he thought, she was playing for time. He stood and pretended to be shaking out his kinks, edging closer to the boy, who remained crouched beside Gracela. In the east a red fireball had cleared the horizon; its sanguine light inspired Mingolla, fueled his resolve. He yawned and edged closer yet, firming his grip on the knife. He would yank the boy's head back by the hair, cut his throat.

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Nerves jumped in his chest. A pressure was building inside him, demanding that he act, that he move now. He restrained himself. Another step should do it, another step to be absolutely sure. But as he was about to take that step, Gracela reached out and tapped the boy on the shoulder.

Surprise must have showed on Mingolla's face, because the boy looked at him and grunted laughter. "You t'ink she pick you?" he said. "Shit! You don' know Gracela, man. Gringos burn her village. She lick the devil's ass 'fore she even shake hands wit' you." He grinned, stroked her hair. " 'Sides, she t'ink if she fuck me good, maybe I say, 'Oh, Gracela, I got to have some more of that!' And who knows? Maybe she right."

Gracela lay back and wriggled out of her skirt. Between her legs, she was nearly hairless. A smile touched the corners of her mouth. Mingolla stared at her, dumbfounded.

"I not going to kill you, gringo," said the boy without looking up; he was running his hand across Gracela's stomach. "I tol' you I won' kill a man so close wit' death." Again he laughed. "You look pretty funny trying to sneak up. I like watching that."

Mingolla was stunned. All the while he had been gearing himself up to kill, shunting aside anxiety and revulsion, he had merely been providing an entertainment for the boy. The heft of the knife seemed to be drawing his anger into a compact shape, and he wanted to carry out his attack, to cut down this little animal who had ridiculed him; but humiliation mixed with the anger, neutralizing it. The poisons of rage shook him; he could feel every incidence of pain and fatigue in his body. His hand was throbbing, bloated and discolored like the hand of a corpse. Weakness pervaded him. And relief.

"Go," said the boy. He lay down beside Gracela, propped on an elbow, and began to tease one of her nipples erect.

Mingolla took a few hesitant steps away. Behind him, Gracela made a mewling noise and the boy whispered something. Mingolla's anger was rekindled—they had already forgotten him!—but he kept going. As he passed the other children, one spat at him and another shied a pebble. He fixed his eyes on the white concrete slipping beneath his feet.

When he reached the mid-point of the curve, he turned back. The children had hemmed in Gracela and the boy against the terminus, blocking them from view. The sky had gone bluish-gray behind them, and the wind carried their voices. They were singing: a ragged, chirpy song that sounded celebratory. Mingolla's anger subsided, his humiliation ebbed. He had nothing to be ashamed of; though he had acted unwisely, he had done so from a posture of strength and no amount of ridicule could diminish that. Things were going to work out. Yes they were! He would make them work out.

For a while he watched the children. At this remove, their singing had

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an appealing savagery and he felt a trace of wistfulness at leaving them behind. He wondered what would happen after the boy had done with Gracela. He was not concerned, only curious. The way you feel when you think you may have to leave a movie before the big finish. Will our heroine survive? Will justice prevail? Will survival and justice bring happiness in their wake? Soon the end of the bridge came to be bathed in the golden rays of the sunburst; the children seemed to be blackening and dissolving in heavenly fire. That was a sufficient resolution for Mingolla. He tossed Gracela's knife into the river and went down from the bridge in whose magic he no longer believed, walking toward the war whose mystery he had accepted as his own.

5

At the airbase, Mingolla took a stand beside the Sikorsky that had brought him to San Francisco de Juticlan; he had recognized it by the painted flaming letters of the words Whispering Death. He rested his head against the letter G and recalled how Baylor had recoiled from the letters, worried that they might transmit some deadly essence. Mingolla didn't mind the contact. The painted flames seemed to be warming the inside of his head, stirring up thoughts as slow and indefinite as smoke. Comforting thoughts that embodied no images or ideas. Just a gentle buzz of mental activity, like the idling of an engine. The base was coming to life around him. Jeeps pulling away from barracks; a couple of officers inspecting the belly of a cargo plane; some guy repairing a fork-lift. Peaceful, homey. Mingolla closed his eyes, lulled into a half-sleep, letting the sun and the painted flames bracket him with heat real and imagined.

Some time later—how much later, he could not be sure—a voice said, "Fucked up your hand pretty good, didn'tcha?"

The two pilots were standing by the cockpit door. In their black flight suits and helmets they looked neither weird nor whimsical, but creatures of functional menace. Masters of the Machine. "Yeah," said Mingolla. "Fucked it up."

"How'd ya do it?" asked the pilot on the left.

"Hit a tree."

"Musta been goddamn crocked to hit a tree," said the pilot on the right. "Tree ain't goin' nowhere if you hit it."

Mingolla made a non-committal noise. "You guys going up to the Farm?"

"You bet! What's the matter, man? Had enough of them wild women?" Pilot on the right.

"Guess so. Wanna gimme a ride?"

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"Sure thing," said the pilot on the left. "Whyn't you climb on in front. You can sit back of us."

"Where your buddies?" asked the pilot on the right.

"Gone," said Mingolla as he climbed into the cockpit.

One of the pilots said, "Didn't think we'd be seein' them boys again."

Mingolla strapped into the observer's seat behind the co-pilot's position. He had assumed there would be a lengthy instrument check, but as soon as the engines had been warmed, the Sikorsky lurched up and veered northward. With the exception of the weapons systems, none of the defenses had been activated. The radar, the thermal imager and terrain display, all showed blank screens. A nervous thrill ran across the muscles of Mingolla's stomach as he considered the varieties of danger to which the pilots' reliance upon their miraculous helmets had laid them open; but his nervousness was subsumed by the whispery rhythms of the rotors and his sense of the Sikorsky's power. He recalled having a similar feeling of secure potency while sitting at the controls of his gun. He had never let that feeling grow, never let it rule him, empower him. He had been a fool.

They followed the northeasterly course of the river, which coiled like a length of blue-steel razor wire between jungled hills. The pilots laughed and joked, and the ride came to have the air of a ride with a couple of good ol' boys going nowhere fast and full of free beer. At one point the co-pilot piped his voice through the on-board speakers and launched into a dolorous country song.

> "Whenever we kiss, dear, our two lips meet,
> And whenever you're not with me, we're apart.
> When you sawed my dog in half, that was depressin',
> But when you shot me in the chest, you broke my heart."

As the co-pilot sang, the pilot rocked the Sikorsky back and forth in a drunken accompaniment, and after the song ended, he called back to Mingolla, "You believe this here son of a bitch wrote that? He did! Picks a guitar, too! Boy's a genius!"

"It's a great song," said Mingolla, and he meant it. The song had made him happy, and that was no small thing.

They went rocking through the skies, singing the first verse over and over. But then, as they left the river behind, still maintaining a northeasterly course, the co-pilot pointed to a section of jungle ahead and shouted, "Beaners! Quadrant Four! You got 'em?"

"Got 'em!" said the pilot. The Sikorsky swerved down toward the jungle, shuddered, and flame veered from beneath them. An instant later, a huge swath of jungle erupted into a gout of marbled smoke and fire.

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"Whee-oo!" the co-pilot sang out, jubilant. "Whisperin' Death strikes again!" With guns blazing, they went swooping through blowing veils of dark smoke. Acres of trees were burning, and still they kept up the attack. Mingolla gritted his teeth against the noise, and when at last the firing stopped, dismayed by this insanity, he sat slumped, his head down. He suddenly doubted his ability to cope with the insanity of the Ant Farm and remembered all his reasons for fear.

The co-pilot turned back to him. "You ain't got no call to look so gloomy, man," he said. "You're a lucky son of a bitch, y'know that?"

The pilot began a bank toward the east, toward the Ant Farm. "How you figure that?" Mingolla asked.

"I gotta clear sight of you, man," said the co-pilot. "I can tell you for true you ain't gonna be at the Farm much longer. It ain't clear why or nothin'. But I 'spect you gonna be wounded. Not bad, though. Just a goin'-home wound."

As the pilot completed the bank, a ray of sun slanted into the cockpit, illuminating the co-pilot's visor, and for a split-second Mingolla could make out the vague shadow of the face beneath. It seemed lumpy and malformed. His imagination added details. Bizarre growths, cracked cheeks, an eye webbed shut. Like a face out of a movie about nuclear mutants. He was tempted to believe that he had really seen this; the co-pilot's deformities would validate his prediction of a secure future. But Mingolla rejected the temptation. He was afraid of dying, afraid of the terrors held by life at the Ant Farm, yet he wanted no more to do with magic . . . unless there was magic involved in being a good soldier. In obeying the disciplines, in the practice of fierceness.

"Could be his hand'll get him home," said the pilot. "That hand looks pretty fucked up to me. Looks like a million-dollar wound, that hand."

"Naw, I don't get it's his hand," said the co-pilot. "Somethin' else. Whatever, it's gonna do the trick."

Mingolla could see his own face floating in the black plastic of the co-pilot's visor; he looked warped and pale, so thoroughly unfamiliar that for a moment he thought the face might be a bad dream the co-pilot was having.

"What the hell's with you, man?" the co-pilot asked. "You don't believe me?"

Mingolla wanted to explain that his attitude had nothing to do with belief or disbelief, that it signaled his intent to obtain a safe future by means of securing his present; but he couldn't think how to put it into words the co-pilot would accept. The co-pilot would merely refer again to his visor as testimony to a magical reality or perhaps would point up ahead where—because the cockpit plastic had gone opaque under the impact of direct sunlight—the sun now appeared to hover in a smoky

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darkness: a distinct fiery sphere with a streaming corona, like one of those cabalistic emblems embossed on ancient seals. It was an evil, fearsome-looking thing, and though Mingolla was unmoved by it, he knew the pilot would see in it a powerful sign.

"You think I'm lyin'?" said the co-pilot angrily. "You think I'd be bullshittin' you 'bout somethin' like this? Man, I ain't lyin'! I'm givin' you the good goddamn word!"

They flew east into the sun, whispering death, into a world disguised as a strange bloody enchantment, over the dark green wild where war had taken root; where men in combat armor fought for no good reason against men wearing brass scorpions on their berets, where crazy, lost men wandered the mystic light of Fire Zone Emerald and mental wizards brooded upon things not yet seen. The co-pilot kept the black bubble of his visor angled back toward Mingolla, waiting for a response. But Mingolla just stared, and before too long the co-pilot turned away. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Nebula-and-Hugo winner James Tiptree, Jr. returns to *IAsfm* in May with our cover story, "Collision." One of Tiptree's recent series of stories about the Great North Rift, "Collision" is a thought-provoking and powerful novella about two interstellar empires locked into a collision course that could lead to interstellar war... and the handful of beings—men, women, and otherwise—who stand between their respective civilizations and an almost-unimaginable devastation. You won't soon forget "Collision."

Also in May is a strong new novelette from Nebula-and-Hugo winner Connie Willis, "Chance," which manages to be at once bittersweet and harrowing; sure to be one of this year's major stories. From the small-town campus of "Chance," Brian W. Aldiss then takes us across the solar system to the gritty red planet Mars, for an ironic examination of "The Difficulties Involved in Photographing Nix Olympica." Also featured in May: Richard Paul Russo makes his *IAsfm* debut with a hard-hitting story that shows us how much one man is willing to pay "For A Place in the Sky"; R.A. Lafferty returns with a funny look at some "Inventions Bright and New," and James P. Blaylock spins an eerie and mysterious tale of "The Shadow on the Doorstep." Plus our usual columns and features. Look for the May issue on your newsstands on April 8, 1986.

Or subscribe, and be sure not to miss any of the great stuff coming up: major novellas by George R.R. Martin, James Patrick Kelly, and Lucius Shepard, plus stories by Bruce Sterling, Avram Davidson, Orson Scott Card, Michael Bishop, Ian Watson, and many others.

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GAMING

(continued from page 24)

Star Frontiers (Nov. 83) by TSR Inc.; *Space Master* (Feb. 86) by Iron Crown Enterprises; *Call of Cthulhu* (July 83) by Chaosium Inc., based on the horror novels by H.P. Lovecraft; and *Car Wars* (Jan. 86) by Steve Jackson Games, which is also a great board game.

Speaking of board games, there are at least a half dozen worth your consideration: *Web & Starship* (Mid-Dec. 85) by West End Games, an award-winning strategy game of two alien races about to collide—and Earth is between them; *BattleTech* (Dec. 85) by FASA Corp., a fast-paced tactical game of behemoth robots guided by human pilots; *Sanctuary* (Aug. 83) and *Hammer's Slammers* by Mayfair Games, two fun games based on Robert Asprin's *Thieves' World* anthologies and David Drake's famous novel, respectively; *Star Fleet Battles* by Task Force Games for those who enjoy detailed tactical starship combat; and *Dune,* based on the novels by Frank Herbert, published by The Avalon Hill Game Company for those who prefer games of strategy and intrigue.

Two card games you should try sometime include: *Illuminati* (Dec. 83) by Steve Jackson Games, which proves that everything is the result of a conspiracy; and *Nuclear War* and its sequel *Nuclear Escalation* (Dec. 84) by Blade/Flying Buffalo, which I personally use to introduce anti-nuke people to gaming ("Do you have 'change' for 20 million people?")

Two easy-to-learn picture book games by Nova Game Designs include: *Dragonriders of Pern* (Aug. 85), based on the novels by Anne McCaffrey; and the *Lost Worlds* series (Dec. 84) which consists of many individual booklets, one per fantasy character (such as a ninja, an amazon, a unicorn, etc.), which you use to fight another player's character, one-on-one.

If it's difficult to find someone in your area who can play these games, you might want to consider play-by-mail (pbm) games. A survey of more than two dozen companies and their games appeared in the 1985 February and March issues. If you have a personal computer, I recommend the Telarium, Infocom, and Microprose games.

Finally, if you're a beginner, or if you'd like to introduce someone to SF and fantasy games, there was a list of beginner's games in the June, 1985 column.

Here's my free gift to all the readers of *IAsfm.* If you send your name and address to me, I'll mail you a copy of a special edition of the new game magazine I now write for. Send your letter or postcard to: Dana Lombardy, *Game News,* 1010 Vermont Ave., N.W., Suite 910, Washington, DC 20005.

Goodbye, and good gaming!●

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Always Coming Home
By Ursula K. Le Guin
Harper & Row, $50 (hard-cover), $25 (paper)

Well, I managed to get that far, he says to himself. Title, author, publisher, price—and what a price—first $25 paperback we've had in this space in my day—that's the easy part. Now what do I say? *The New York Times* gets some polymath like Samuel R. Delany to review books like this; what do I know? I review space operas and fantasies with dragons (he whimpers). I don't even know what this *is!* It's not a novel, and not a collection of short stories, and it's not essays, and it's got a bloody *audio tape* with it!

Come on, Searles, pull yourself together. Play the tape on the desk boom box and describe the book to the folks.

Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* is an ethnological study of a culture yet to be. It's a mosaic of the culture's poems, folk tales, biographies, and dramas, with commentaries by the ethnologist (archeologist? sociologist?), and a good deal of factual matter in articles thoughtfully placed at, and labeled, "The Back of the Book." The audio tape, of course, contains the folk's songs (which may or may not be folksongs).

Le Guin, daughter of anthropologists, has always been noted for her talent to create realistic background cultures (out of which rise the characters and plots) for her novels. In *Always Coming Home* she has taken this about as far as it can go; the culture takes the foreground, and the characters are seen, for the most part briefly, in one case at greater length, within its context. It's like seeing a play with immensely complex scenery and an occasional actor wandering through.

Already that's a simplistically unfair assessment—the culture is rich and human and far from dull—but let it stand as a warning to those who are after a *story*. There *is* a story here, told in three parts by the woman, Stone Telling; it is her autobiography. But it is only a part of this book.

These people, the Kesh, live on the California coast near what is now San Francisco; the coastline is drastically changed and the Gulf of California has extended to give them an inland sea to the east. Much of the land is poisoned and there are large areas which are unhealthy. The Kesh are a pastoral

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folk; their culture seems at first glance primitive, with the immense complexities of primitive societies. However, as the reader progresses in the erratic exposition of poem, story, biography, there are surprises in store; I won't give them away here.

It *can* be noted, however, that the names, style of expression, music, and folklore of the Kesh are superficially reminiscent of the Western American Indian. But don't let that fool you into thinking this is just another feathers-and-pottery crowd. The stories are sometimes outright fables featuring an anthropomorphic Coyote, and sometimes realistically-told acounts of events, as in the Kesh novel, *Dangerous People*, of which we are given the second chapter.

The poems are short and simple, but often highly stylized. The dramas are also stylized, but not incomprehensibly so. The author-archeologist makes her presence known in the short opening piece, "Towards An Archeology of the Future," where she notes that she is not reconstructing, but preconstructing, as it were, a society. Throughout, her voice is heard in short essays, sometimes interviewing the Kesh, sometimes soliloquizing ("Pandora Worrying About What She Is Doing: She Addresses the Reader With Agitation"). Le Guin, in these pieces and in her view of our own time as seen through the eyes of the future, makes some bitter indictments of the present (such as the simply true but seldom heard point that there are just too many people —period), but doesn't overload the book with message.

Nor is she creating a Utopia. There is conflict, unhappiness, and sickness (mental and physical, the latter often coming from the poisons of the past) among the Kesh. Perhaps her strongest point, however, is that, almost always, their problems are immediate ones, concerning themselves and their close community; it seems Utopic to one reader, at least, that they are not forced to worry about what is happening half-way around the globe. One of a collection of Kesh "sayings, wise saws, and small stones" is, "Cats may be green somewhere else, but the cats here don't care."

If all this sounds like a complicated work, it is that. The reader has to labor, even though the disparate parts are artfully arranged so that the many unfamiliar aspects of this society fall into place gradually and without too much frustration for the uninitiate. But you do have to be alert: at one point, for instance, Stone Telling speaks obliquely of a period of sexual frustration, and then notes, "That Spring I danced the Moon for the first time." You'll miss the point entirely unless you've read the article on "Dancing the Moon" some 150 pages before that.

In *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin has succeeded in creating a book like no other. For some, it will be an exercise in tedium, too close to an anthropology textbook, a sort

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of "Coming of Age in Sacramento-to-be." For others, it will be a work to reread often; one suspects that there will be much to discover there even the tenth time around.

The drawings in the book, simple, decorative and sometimes exquisite, are by Margaret Chodos. The music (played several times as this review was written) is by Todd Barton; it is apt and, in its way, also informative. One piece, the "Long Singing," is particularly impressive. The geomancer for the book is George Hersh. The maps are by the author.

The Alien Main
By T.L. Sherred and
Lloyd Biggle, Jr.,
Doubleday, $12.95

You can't go home again, but in T.L. Sherred and Lloyd Biggle, Jr.'s *The Alien Main*, three young people of Earth ancestry try it. Trouble is, Earth has done itself in 200 years ago in a nuclear war. Some refugees escaped to the Regez Anlf, an interstellar trading empire that had just established contact with Earth.

Now, two centuries later, there is the uneasy feeling in the Regez Anlf that that contact might have triggered what had been a stable situation previously. So monies are appropriated to mount an expedition to Earth, which has been under embargo. This consists of two young men and a young woman (who is in command) descended from the Terran refugees. They go with the backup of a space cruiser and crew, but it is their various special skills that will enable them, with luck, to check out the current situation on Earth and, with more luck, pick up the pieces.

Needless to say, things do not go smoothly. After surveying the planet, they are mystified to find a bare handful of human settlements, scattered at huge distances across the continents. These survivors are all black, and range from primitive cannibals to fairly self-sufficient settlements. Then a much more sophisticated white settlement is found in Iceland. A good deal of time is spent in piecing together what has happened in the last two centuries, the events of which include a devastating plague which wiped out most blacks and all other races except the mysterious Icelandic community.

Then matters get more complicated as an alien ship appears, an eventuality which has never happened to the Regez Anlf, but for which they have prepared, or so our brave trio think. However, their cruiser captain funks and deserts them, and so they are not only left with a world to rebuild, but hostile aliens as well as balky primitives to cope with. It is the aliens, by the way, who spread the plague in the first place—they have been watching Earth for several hundred years (the heroine does a little flying saucer research).

The story skips along merrily from mystery to mystery, crisis to crisis, all of which the three world-savers handle with various degrees

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of competency. They are not portrayed as the brightest kids in the known universe, and I'm not sure I'd entrust *my* world to be saved by them, but their very lack of superhuman capabilities makes them and their adventures rather appealing.

In the Face of My Enemy
By Joseph Delaney
Baen Books, $2.95 (paper)

He-Who-Waits is the name of the hero of Joseph Delaney's *In the Face of My Enemy*, and an apt one it is, since he hangs in for millennia during the course of the novel. He has this problem; he's immortal. Not only that; he's able to rearrange his body structure and become anybody or anything (within reasonable weight limits). It seems that 18,000 years ago, he was this perfectly ordinary Indian shaman connected to a perfectly ordinary tribe of hunter-gatherers. Out on his own on a spirit journey and what with having eaten some magic mushrooms and not being as young as he used to be, he comes very close to dying.

Luckily for him, there are some visiting aliens nearby, who do a rebuilding job on his body, and when he comes to, he's rejuvenated, immortal, and, physically, downright protean. All this happens in the Sacramento Valley in Old California—which figures.

So when his people are enslaved by some proto-Aztecs and carted off to Mexico, He-Who-Waits accompanies them in the form of the pet wolf of the slavers' chief. They all wind up in a many-pyramided city, and He-Etc. takes the place of a female sacrifice and arises after having his/her heart torn out and scares the bejesus—or the bequetzalcoatl—out of the populace. In fact, he probably *is* Quetzalcoatl, since he then assumes the shape of a fair-haired, bearded man.

After a quick skip of 16,000 years or so, he falls in with some Viking settlers, assumes the identity of one of them, saves the rest by leading them back to Iceland, settles there for a while, and then wanders around eleventh-century Europe, looking for others of his kind who have been transformed by the "spirits."

Another quick skip to our future; mankind is in space (apparently thanks to He-Who, in an episode only alluded to), and guess who's right there in the forefront of the pioneers? Teaming up with the U.N. Ecological Committee, he bests an alien empire which we meet on a planet which *we're* trying to colonize, and *they're* using as a dumping ground for political prisoners. Then there's another group of aliens who are sort of spies for this infinitely smart but childish entity that's been traveling space for millennia looking for someone to share things with. Is this what He-Who-Waits has been waiting for?

A plus to Delaney for trying something a little new, and certainly ambitious. Maybe a little too ambitious—the reader skips along the surface of He-Who's adven-

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tures, and everything's pretty much *on* the surface, though the ageless hero does natter a lot about the problems of immortality, and his role in the scheme of things. The half of the book set in the past is pretty stiff, with not much feeling for historical reality, and some dubious historicity (the pre-Columbian American dating seems to imply some pretty wild theories about the age of Meso-American culture). The future sections have more feel to them; the two episodes are goodish space-faring adventure, spiced by the hero's unique abilities.

Claimed
By Francis Stevens
Carroll & Graf, $3.50 (paper)

A year or so ago in this space, the review of Francis Stevens' *The Heads of Cerberus* pointed out her claim to being the first American woman author of science fiction (she published in the general fiction pulp magazines just after WW I). Aside from this distinction, she's a damn good writer as period pulp writers go, and those with a smidgin of historical perspective will enjoy her work. So it's a pleasure to see her *Claimed* in its first paperback edition (there was a small press hard-cover back in the '60s).

There wasn't that much distinction in those days between SF and fantasy, and *Claimed* can be classified more or less as a weird fantasy. A strange artifact is found by a seaman on an island volcanically risen from the ocean floor. It winds up in the hands of a collector, an aged, unpleasant tycoon with (of course) a beautiful niece. *Something* is trying to get the artifact back, and its manifestations are all of the sea—fogs, storms, and powerful delusions of rising waters inside the tycoon's mansion itself.

Eventually uncle, niece, and artifact are kidnapped by the crew of an ancient galleon which appears on the New Jersey waterfront. Pursued by the young doctor-hero, they eventually learn of the artifact's connection with sunken Atlantis and its chief god, Poseidon.

All this could be—is, for that matter—period balderdash, but Stevens' handling is masterly. The peculiar and oblique supernatural attacks are suitably unnerving, and the God manifest is a remarkably ahuman, quite alien entity, thoroughly unanthropomorphic. Lovecraft fans will also find some remarkable similarities here to his fishier stories (*Dagon* et al.). What's interesting is that *Claimed* appeared in *Argosy* in 1920. *Dagon*, Lovecraft's first story to be published in a genre magazine, appeared in 1923.

The Mysteries of Harris Burdick
By Chris Van Allsburg
Houghton Mifflin, $14.95

This review of Chris Van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* is a little after the fact, since the book was published last year, but Van Allsburg's World Fantasy Award (special award— professional) has raised interest in it.

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Since everybody (including me) missed it on publication, and since it's a fascinating little book (less than thirty pages), it should be talked about—better late than . . .

The conceit is that Van Allsburg, visiting a retired-editor friend, was shown some fourteen drawings which had been left with his friend thirty years ago by one Harris Burdick, with a promise to return with the stories which go with the pictures. He never returned; the pictures have titles and one-line captions. These make up the book.

The black-and-white drawings are very neat and "realistic," with a marvelous use of graining. All but one have science-fictional or fantastic subjects, reinforced by the titles and captions, which are relatable to the picture loosely if at all.

I'll cite one example: the title is "Another Time, Another Place"; the caption reads, "If there was an answer, he'd find it there." The picture shows a small railway handcart, in this case sail powered. It is proceeding along rails on a rock-and-pebble fill that fades into haze in the distance; on either side is water. Barely discernable through the haze in the far distance is a building of many towers—whether ancient or modern is hard to determine. There are four figures seated in the cart, their backs to us; the two in the front, male and female, seem to be adults, the two in the rear young boys, one in a sailor suit.

The other pictures are equally evocative, equally mysterious. Their purpose, if you're wondering, is to stir the mind to wonder. Even if you're not a writer, the impulse is to make up some sort of story to go with each. It's obviously wonderful for the young person with a creative imagination, if there are any such left, but even the susceptible adult will succumb, I suspect.

Sinister Barrier
By Eric Frank Russell
Del Rey, $2.95 (paper)

Eric Frank Russell was one of John W. Campbell's unknown, astounding wonder boys whose name has not been maintained in the pantheon of SF. One possible reason is that he published little after 1960 (he died in 1978) and time has proved that it takes continual publication to keep all but the greatest of authors in the public eye. Another reason might be that he just wasn't quite as good a writer as the others (Heinlein, Asimov, De Camp, et al.). The ideas are there, but the execution wasn't all that it might have been.

This doesn't mean that Russell can't be read today; lord know there are enough inept writers being published and purchased nowadays. Russell's most famous novel, *Sinister Barrier*, has been reprinted after umpteen years of unavailability; it's certainly readable, and is based on an idea you don't come across much anymore.

It's the mankind-is-property concept; i.e., you, me, and the rest of humanity are really just sort of

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cows in a field, maintained by aliens who are invisible and intangible (sort of pure energy types). They keep us going because they feed on our emotional energy (do you feel tired and drained at the end of the day, even when you've done nothing much but argue with the wife/husband?), particularly strong, irrational, "animal" emotions. Therefore they keep their "cattle" in a continual state of anxiety and acrimony. Thus the unfortunate history of wars and the rumors of wars which is man's (and woman's).

Early in the next century, Bill Graham, leg man for an obscure government bureau which has to do with the allocation of grants, witnesses the apparent suicide of a well-known scientist. Graham knows the man, and finds the suicide theory hard to swallow, and by a combination of intuition and luck, links the similar deaths of several scientific figures to one in particular, an expert in optics. Then the town of Silver City, Idaho, is blown to smithereens; it is the home of the National Camera Company, an employee of which is another link in the chain and who fortuitously escaped smithereening. Seems that this group of researchers has discovered a process by which vision can be extended into the infra-red. In doing so, they have discovered floating blue balls of pure energy which are omnipresent around humans, and which seem to manipulate their affairs mentally.

Whoever learns of this is almost for sure going to be bumped off immediately, but Graham manages to get the facts to the President, who makes it public. And all Hell breaks loose, as the blue thingies retaliate.

Russell's dialogue is awkward, the story goes all over the place without much narrative line, and there's an annoying female doctor who makes token appearances simply because the hero has to have some sort of glandular reaction besides adrenal. But the idea is a good one, and even after all these years (SB was first published in 1939, rewritten in 1948), it's not one that has seen overuse.

Shoptalk . . . Raymond Feist's Tolkienesque *Magician* has achieved quite a following although it has, until now, been available only in hard-cover and trade paperback. A sequel, *Silverthorn*, recently appeared in hard-cover and also sold well. Now the two will be published in mass-market paperback as three books, the first of which is called *Magician: Apprentice* (Bantam, $3.50). The other two will also have titles that begin with *Magician:*. Defensive readers (who admittedly have some cause to be so) will claim that this is yet another publisher's ploy to sell two books for the price of three, but in this case, it would seem to be a functional effort to make an unwieldy dyptich (*Magician* is a *long* book) into a manageable paperback trilogy.

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As you might have noticed, "Star Trek" has changed from a TV phenomenon to a print phenomenon; the Star Trek novels, which have naught to do in plots with anything shown on screen, big or little, are hot sellers, and keep appearing every month or so. We have perhaps unjustly neglected them in this space, but we can bring news of some long-unavailable material to make up for it. Most of the *Star Trek Logs* have been out of print for some time; for those not in the know, they are the—well, you can't call them novelizations, because they're short, and short storyizations sounds silly—story anthologies drawn from the "Star Trek" animated series which appeared (when else?) on Saturday mornings. Books one through six are now available (Del Rey, $2.95 each, paper). Then there were the original Star Trek books, episodes from the old show itself, adapted by James Blish, and published simply as *Star Trek 1*, *Star Trek 2*, etc. The publisher began by reprinting them under new titles: *Day of the Dove* was originally *Star Trek 11*. But apparently there was some negative reaction, because *Star Trek 12* reappeared as *Star Trek 12* (in this case, Blish with J.A. Lawrence). Presumably 1 through 10 will be resuscitated as such (Bantam, $2.95 each, paper).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Mermaids!*, edited by Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois, Ace, $2.95 (paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

This is the heart of the Spring con(vention) season. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a later, longer list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. (703) 823-3117 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send a SASE when writing cons. Early evening is often a good time to call cons. For free listings, tell me about your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons behind the iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge.

MARCH, 1986

7–9—**LunaCon.** Westchester Marriott Hotel, Tarrytown NY. Madeleine L'Engle, Marta Randall, Dawn Wilson, Art Saha. The dowager queen of East Coast cons, once the only big one. Just north of NYC.

7–9—**KatoniCon.** Holiday Inn, Gaithersburg MD. The emphasis will be on gaming. "Grand Masque."

7–9—**ConCave 7.** Park Mammoth Resort, Park City KY. John A. R. Hollis. Low-key relaxacon at a spa.

14–16—**MilleniCon** ("minus 15, & counting"). Holiday Inn, Englewood OH. A. J. Offutt, Bill Cavin.

14–16—**OwlCon.** Rice University. Houston TX. Being put on in conjunction with the wargaming club.

14–16—**HalCon.** Nova Scotian Hotel, Halifax NS. Joan D. Vinge, Linda Michaels. Ninth annual con.

20–23—**NorwesCon, Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 723–2101 or 789–0599 or 453–8550.** Anne McCaffrey, Kelly & P. Freas, S. & J. Robinson, J. Oberg. Over 100 authors, editors, etc., planned. Stardance, masquerade, SCA tourney (medieval fighting), fan olympics, Philip K. Dick award given.

28–31—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203.** Artist V. Wyman, musician L. Fish. Big (2,000).

28–31—**MiniCon, Box 2128 Loop Sta., Minneapolis MN 55402.** D. Knight, K. Wilhelm, Ken Fletcher.

28–31—**Australian National Con, Box 318, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.** Perth, Australia. Cherryh.

28–31—**British National Con, 20 Hillington Gardens, Glasgow G52 1PR, UK.** At the Central Hotel.

APRIL, 1986

4–6—**WichaCon, 211 N. Oliver, Wichita KS 67208.** M. Z. Bradley, J. S. Gephardt, Robert Vardeman.

4–6—**GeneriCon, Box 66, Renssaelaer Union, Troy NY 12180.** Artist Mark Rogers, "vampire" M. Gear.

4–6—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533.** Masquerade. Ninth annual Gulf Coast convention.

AUGUST, 1987

27–Sep. 2—**ConSpiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton UK. The 1987 WorldCon, in England. Doris Lessing, Alfred Bester, Brian Aldiss, Jim Burns. Join before April 1986 for $30.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5–8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. NASFiC 1987, held since WorldCon's abroad.

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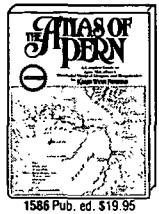

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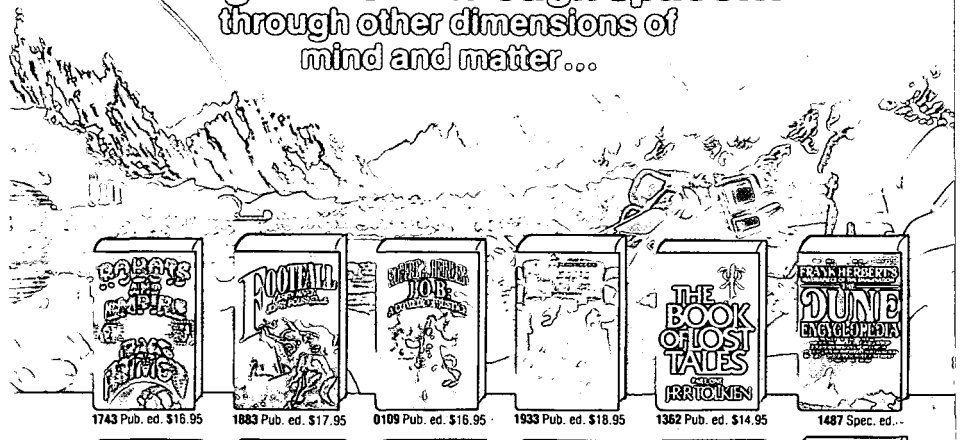

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